Negotiating Ludic Normativity in Facebook Meme Pages

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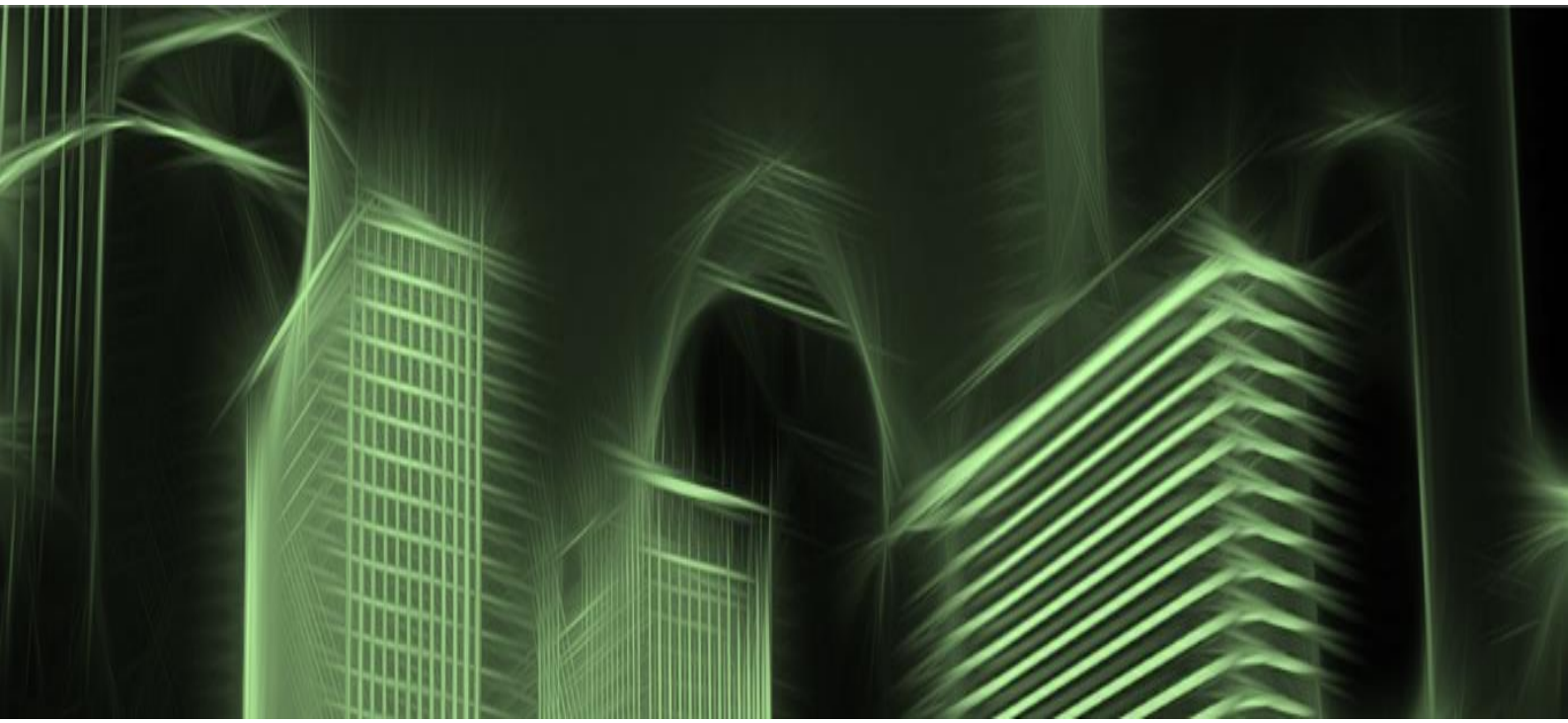

Tilburg University

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PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University,
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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

"It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world."
(Huizinga 1980: 46)

A quick glance over the growing scholarship on Internet memes reveals an interesting incongruity. While Internet memes have been continually described as a *playful* expression of human creativity exploiting the communicative affordances of digital technologies, the elements of *play* have been increasingly backgrounded, ambivalent or entirely absent. That is, if we accept play as a voluntary and absorbing activity remaining "separate, inclosed, [and] in principle devoid of important repercussions upon the solidity and continuity of collective and institutional life" (Caillois 1957: 99; Huizinga 1980). The spirit of ludic play has accompanied early research approaching memes as usually humor-driven artifacts endemic to marginal Internet subcultures laden with absurdity, irony, silliness, bizarreness, mischief and other oddities governed by their own logic that inspires curiosity rather than seriousness (Shifman 2014b). However, much of the recent discourse-analytically oriented research on memes suggests otherwise (Denisova 2019; Wiggins 2019b; see Miltner 2018 for an overview). In this view, we are presented with both theoretical and empirical accounts of memes as vehicles of grassroots socio-political commentary and critique in the contemporary online-offline nexus – memes offer powerful means of both subversion and advocacy with a capacity to sway public opinion, and therefore we should take them seriously (Shifman 2013). This (non-)seriousness of Internet memes deserves a closer look.

Internet memes generally refer to digital items (images, catchphrases, videos, sounds, choreographies and other semiotic assemblages conveying a message, concept or an idea) gaining influence through online transmission and mutation as a result of participatory culture. Memes were originally conceived of as cultural counterparts to biological genes replicating and spreading among people on the basis of Darwinian evolution (Dawkins 1976). In the more contemporary understanding, Internet memes are not passed on entirely 'intact' like genes; instead, they are "changed, modified, mixed with other referential and expressive resources, and regularly given idiosyncratic spins by participants" (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 208-209).[1] It is therefore unsurprising to find recurrent references to memes as *playful* or *creative* reconfigurations and recontextualizations of culturally loaded semiotic resources to portray or comment on any issue of public

[1] Memes are sometimes distinguished from 'virals' circulated without altering their form or content (Jenkins et al. 2009).

attention. But engaging with Internet memes in the sense of play as something inconsequential to institutional and everyday reality is rarely considered, especially in the light of concerns about authenticity, visibility and ambivalence of user-generated content and its exploitability (Phillips and Milner 2017; cf. Blommaert 2018b).

These concerns involve online fringe communities associated with far-right sections on various platforms (particularly 4chan, Reddit and Gab) 'weaponizing' memes to propel racist and hateful sentiments along the lines of extremist ideologies centered mostly around ethno-nationalism (notably that of the American Alt Right, e.g. Zannettou et al. 2018, but also its European New Right counterparts, e.g. Bogerts and Fielitz 2018). The communities exploit the pervasive nature of and affective potential in memes as part of 'attention hacking', that is, co-opting online cultures to increase presence and visibility of their ideologies in the digital mainstream. The notion of play is then sometimes invoked with regard to using elements of humor and irony to 'whitewash' bigoted, xenophobic and other ideas expressed through memes as mere satire disinterested in the 'real world' (Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018), or as 'only joking' (alternatively doing it 'for the lulz', Milner 2013a). Internet memes have also been documented to operate as contested cultural capital (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015), disseminated and dispersed among countless online spaces and collectivities developing efforts to safeguard the traditions, genres and practices with which they have been historically associated, and which resist their appropriation for serious political activism or expressing misanthropic sentiments (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz 2018).

These counter-reactions bear two important implications. First, they speak of the messy, ever-shifting image of the contemporary memetic flows being lodged between somewhat peculiarly ludic enterprise driven by fun on one hand, and serious investment in political propaganda on the other. We are thus presented with an image of digital landscape in which meaning is perpetually contested, reshaped and repacked, and in which ambivalence (rather than 'earnestness') seems to be the central feature (Phillips and Milner 2017). This is reflected in the forms, which communication participants strategically choose, in the identities they construct and impose on others, in the interpersonal power relations they establish, maintain and challenge – all in conjunction with the techno-social affordances and constraints of the individual platforms enabling such forms of communication.

The second implication is that despite their variability and unpredictability, memes display normative features as they become subject to policing, ratification and negotiation. The norms do not manifest only in particular semiotic arrangements defining recognizable memetic genres and formats but also in the social conduct they induce. More specifically, norms transpire also in the specific modes of interaction and interpretation involving memes with direct bearing on social life and communicative practices in the collectivities centered around them. While the existence of lighthearted or wholesome political memes is generally not questioned, any claim to authentic or genuinely ludic orientation to such memes calls for skepticism and scrutiny – scrutiny that demands expanding our analytical focus from meaning presumably inscribed and transferred in memes to the observable effects they engender in the local contexts of their mobilization

against the backdrop of their translocal, socio-historical trajectories (Phillips 2015; Varis and Blommaert 2015).

While often described in the form of 'snapshots' capturing different views, sentiments and affectivities forming around certain topics, events, trends, institutions and other phenomena relevant to the societies and cultures they traverse, memes carry much more. They also tease out reactions informing about the uptake and interpretations of such 'snapshots' in the flows and contingencies of situated encounters in digitally mediated social arenas, most notably in social networking sites. This in turn informs about achieving and negotiating intersubjectivity among disembodied Internet users, as well as about building social cohesion and structuring social events in essentially dynamic and often fragmented environments, including the status and (non-)significance of play in the interactions involving memes.

The socio-cultural load in memes provides and feeds into contexts for communication within the temporal unfolding of social situations and processes they instigate simply by being posted. Such contexts then shape participation, color their encounters, frame institutions, affect the sense of groupness and community-formation along with a host of other social realities and processes. Drawing on insights from approaches centered around linguistic ethnography (see Snell et al. 2015 for an overview), the imperative that *contexts should be investigated rather than assumed* holds strong not only for the fact that digital settings are hardly predictable but also because meaning in context is inevitably multilayered and amounts to more than ideas expressed or inscribed in memes. Like the participants who construct and construe meaning, it refuses to sit still and "takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes" (Rampton 2009: 1) depending on diverse criteria, identities, beliefs and ideologies. I shall be therefore focusing on meaning-*making*, that is, *value effects* derived from local enactments of historically loaded semiotic resources embedded in or associated with memes (cf. Bakhtin 1981; Silverstein 1992; Blommaert 2005: Chapter 4). This necessarily involves taking on board the technologically mediated affordances and constraints on communicative action in digital environments.

Shaped by the respective techno-social infrastructures, memes prompt a wide array of reactions and forms of participation, including, for example, upvoting or downvoting on Reddit, 'liking' or 'sharing' on Facebook, 'retweeting' on Twitter, as well as using hashtags on such platforms. Such practices are essentially evaluative in nature; memes may earn new meanings contextualized by different audiences and participant frameworks. For example, every time a meme is posted on a Facebook page, it reaches different circles of Facebook users who may engage with it (e.g. those who follow the page, friends of those who interact with the meme-post or those non-associated with the page but accessing its content on the basis of Facebook's algorithm-driven suggestions). Consequently, interactional and interpretative work gives evidence of the normatively polycentric, translocal and fragmented memetic landscape in which memes bring about different effects depending on the values and functions participants attribute to them within and across particular social arenas. Memes enter the processes of weaving interpersonal power relations, navigating availability and accessibility of communicative resources and ratification of their 'appropriate' or 'correct' usage vis-à-vis larger historical patterns such

as genres or traditions (Blommaert 2013: 5). Finally, observing and investigating the contexts of mobilization of memes provides us with rich ethnographic data on the social, cultural, political, emotive-affective investments that speak of *what people actually do with memes* and, perhaps more interestingly, *what memes do with people* (cf. Kell 2015).

In doing so, I will be concerned with one type of memes detected in the above-mentioned fringe communities (Zannettou et al. 2018) – a specific type of comics self-designated as 'geopolitical satire meme' known as Polandball, or more generally as Countryballs, and how its proponents negotiate ludic normativity on Facebook.

Figure 1. A Countryball comic strip retrieved from the archive of Politically Incorrect /pol/ 4chan board.

Based on ethnographic observation of Facebook pages dedicated to Countryballs (2014-2019), the present work will argue that Countryball memes have created a semiotic universe that inflects the sociality forming around them with a strong tendency towards ludic conviviality that resists their 'weaponization'. Compared to other memetic formats or genres, Countryballs memes are usually accompanied by a remarkable degree of social cohesion among the audiences they attract in collectivities organized around them. This can be partially explained with regard to their socio-historical trajectories presented by Countryball fans as follows:

> The meme has developed differently than many other Internet memes in that it has a strong community of followers across many websites, but is not always completely known of or understood outside of its communities. Regardless, Polandball[2] has become a staple of many websites to depict international events. It has drawn the attention of scholars, front pages of websites and newspapers, game developers, politicians and ministries, and even celebrities, amongst other people. (Polandball Wiki: "Polandball (meme)", n. pag.)

Having originated from an international section of *Krautchan* (a German-based mutation of 4chan) in 2009, the first comics aimed to poke fun at a Polish member of the forum because of his celebration of Polish nationalism and intriguing use of Poglish (a macaronic mixture of Polish and English). In addition, his embodiment – the Polandball character – was mistakenly portrayed upside down at first, but as more people became involved with the comics, it gave way to a convention to further underscore the ludic, whimsical nature of the format (Know Your Meme 2010c: "Polandball"). Its jocular character soon gained popularity beyond the forum more as a form of geopolitical satire with dedicated sections on meme-oriented aggregators (9gag or Reddit), Internet encyclopedias (Know Your Meme, Polandball Wiki), as well as pages, profiles and groups on virtually all social media. Moreover, having become a household name of memes, Countryballs continue to attract a growing number of people or fans subscribing to them. For example, the original and largest Countryball Facebook page *POLANDBALL* counts over 446,000 'likes' members in May 2019 compared to half the amount in 2015 when I conducted the first study on Countryballs (Procházka 2016), and nearly a quarter of the amount when I started becoming familiar with the comics in 2014.

Countryballs thus represent one of the rare cases in which memes do not go out of fashion after reaching a viral peak and exhausting their communicative or humorous potential (usually in a month following extensive overusing and subsequently 'getting old', Nie 2018: 82). Instead, Countryball communities have developed and cultivated communicative patterns and scripts based on buffoonery and whimsicality signaled by re-iterated heteroglossic tropes, jokes, puns, catch-phrases and other devices arranged in a recognizable semiotic design (multi-pane composition, not using a circle tool when drawing or adhering to visual quirks such as always drawing the Polandball character upside down). Countryballs in this sense offer a semiotic register (Agha 2007b) allowing anyone

[2] Countryball fans usually refer to the meme as 'Polandball'; however, to avoid confusion with the actual character in the comics, the more general term *Countryballs* and the like will be used when addressing the meme in general.

to translate both historical and contemporary geopolitical issues, international 'drama' and other events of note into easy-to-draw, child-like and innocent-looking sketches with no need for advanced drawing skills or sophisticated graphic editing software.

Like other memetic genres, the Countryball format promotes creative and witty use of recognizable sociocultural resources – in this case, stereotypes and linguistic-semiotic resources generally associated with given countries or nation-states – and frame them in meaningful ways for others. Countryball platforms are frequently self-described or flagged as a 'geopolitical satire' to signal that the comics are not meant to be more than humorous digs at the stereotypes. This is also to discourage serious interpretation and engagement with others that would involve patronizing, flippant or aggressive responses. But since these responses are unavoidable, the *POLANDBALL* page on Facebook has cultivated and maintained a relatively balanced humorous dynamics in which *all* countries ought to be subjected to the satire in a circular fashion:

> [T]he page has a diverse fanbase hailing from all over the world with a wide array of beliefs. This means that whatever the page posts will be 'bait' by default and enrage whoever the comic made a jab at. This usually results in the fanbase circlejerking around the joke and making fun of the 'victim' while the 'victim' calls Poland all sorts of names. Said 'victims' return to the page once the next comic is posted that makes fun of a political or cultural group that they in turn do not like. Rinse and repeat. (Polandball Wiki: "Polandball on Facebook", n. pag.)

In principle, Countryball comics should be taken lightly, with a touch of humor, and not in a serious way despite their outwardly disparaging elements – criticizing the comics on the basis of their 'silly', 'nonsensical' or 'offensive' portrayals of the countries is discouraged in favor of fostering collective enjoyment and communality. Using the comics to systematically and seriously (un-ironically) propagate certain political predilections or perspectives is likely to be meted out with criticism too. The design of Countryball memes thus comes close to expressing Bakhtin's (1984: 122-130) 'carnival sense of the world' characterized by familiar and free interaction among diverse people, welcoming otherwise socially unacceptable behavior, including inversion or subversion of protocol, etiquette, decorum, morals and other socio-communicative norms. Fun is here the end in itself, there is – or should be – no greater purpose, as will be shown later in the gatekeeping practices enacted by those who engage with them. In other words, the normative ideal behind Countryball memes fits the definition of 'ludic', according to Oxford dictionary, precisely in "showing tendency to play and have fun, make jokes, etc., especially when there is no particular reason for doing this" (Hornby 2010: 921; Blommaert 2017b).

Here we arrive at the first contours of ludic 'play' which, as the present work argues, lies at the heart of the organization of social life and communicative practices pertaining to Countryballs on Facebook. This claim might not come as a surprise since the vast majority of studies on Internet memes ascribe a playful quality to them; however, their ludic aspects remain surprisingly under-theorized and often taken for granted. As previously indicated, playfulness is mostly reduced only to creative manipulation with recognizable cultural emblems across semiotic systems (mixing, superimposing or otherwise arranging

texts, images, videos, sounds, gestures, choreographies etc.) in novel and unexpected ways, often (but not necessarily) in humorous compositions. The ludic, playful potential in memes then manifests in utilization (or exploitation) of memes and memetic resources in cultural and political participation against the backdrop of specific discourses to which they pertain, but rarely in terms of their actual uptake in the social arenas where they are deployed (cf. Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015).

The next chapter draws on Huizinga's seminal *Homo Ludens* (1980) to map the ludic genealogy throughout the scholarship on Internet memes against the development of Countryball memes documented and evaluated by their fans from multiple sources (Polandball Wiki, semi-academic database tracking memes Know Your Meme and online articles) in order to pave the way for a broader and more precise understanding of its sociohistorical roots which are crucial in any subsequent interpretative work. This will enable us to move beyond playfulness as an assumed quality behind memes to play as a specific mode of contextualization of the (geopolitical) realities reinvented or transcribed in (Countryball) memes. Huizinga's play-concept will also be central to laying the groundwork for complementing content- and system-oriented perspectives on memes with an action-based approach designed to get a grasp on the situated effects of memes. Chapter 4 will then anchor this approach in contemporary interactional sociolinguistics and digital ethnography providing a theoretical and methodological framework for examining how participants co-create and negotiate a ludic sense of normativity in their reception of Countryball memes in polycentric digital environments of social media, particularly Facebook. The subsequent chapters use the framework to formulate and address research questions guiding four case studies that investigate two Countryball pages on Facebook with a focus on the ways in which participants articulate (Chapter 4), police (Chapter 5), break (Chapter 6) and re-construct (Chapter 7) ludic normativity through the prism of their pragmatically and metapragmatically reflexive comments. The final chapter revisits Huizinga's play-concept in the light of the insights gained from preceding chapters and outlines its analytical remit against the current developments in the scholarship on Internet memes.

CHAPTER 2

From playfulness to play

As already noted, playfulness has become coterminous with memes and memetic discourses, yet the questions of being playful to whom and how remain rarely addressed. This chapter draws on ludic concept of play not only to give nuance to the quality of playfulness but also to develop a framework for investigating its effects on social life in communities and collectivities organized around Internet memes.

Play signifies a specific type of situated activity separated from the ordinary, everyday life. It allows one to engage with contingent, indeterminate and ephemeral subjunctive (as-if) realities in which general or conventional beliefs, rationality, values and norms are suspended in favor of creating and enacting non-conventional approaches, associations and manners with the understanding that their consequences might not be the same as outside the play(ground). Taking play as a point of departure brings attention to the kinds of subjunctive realities, which place 'frame' around a separate spatiotemporal setting (e.g. a Countryball post and its comment section embedded in a Countryball Facebook page). This is to study the ways in which it is invoked along with its effects in interpretative and relational work; more precisely, how the play-frame imposes a certain type of ludic 'sense' on every social action within that frame (Goffman 1961: 20; Bateson 1972). In the eyes of Bauman and Briggs (1990: 63),

> play frames not only alter the performative force of utterances but provide settings in which speech and society can be questioned and transformed. Participation structure, particularly the nature of turn-taking and performer-audience interaction, can have profound implications for shaping social relations.

Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* offers a useful conceptualization of this play-frame. Huizinga posits that culture emanates from play. Play is a manifestation of freedom and invention as well as order and discipline. For the purposes of the present work, Huizinga's play-concept can be summarized as (i) a voluntary activity situated outside 'ordinary' life and 'rational' modes of reasoning enacted in specific boundaries of time and space, where (ii) it creates and imposes specific meanings and behavioral orders predicated on certain 'as if(s)' that (iii) prompt specific forms of togetherness and collectivity connected with no material interest or profit.

It will be demonstrated that the characteristics are inscribed in the origins of Internet memes since they comprise a significant historical layer of simultaneous meanings attached to memes (Blommaert 2005: 126) to which participants (may) orient to and which

compels play as a (preferred) mode of interaction. As an emerging discursive orientation, the ludic mode of interaction rests on generating and fostering three main social ingredients: separation, order and community. In what follows, I will use Huizinga's ludic framework as a useful heuristic to identify these ingredients in the historical course of mostly discursive-analytical literature on memes. This will be done against the backdrop of Countryball memes and their diffusion in order to distill the socio-historical relevance of play that encircles interactions prompted by (Countryball) memes.

2.1 Play as separation

The first element of play was already indicated in the early seminal studies on then-popular and rapidly spreading Internet memes. For example, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) note that "the playfulness seen in most of these online memes – whether absurdist or aimed at social commentary – taps into shared popular culture experiences and practices" (217). Another influential early study (Burgess 2008) maps this sharedness into recognizability. Through repetition and iteration, memes gain semiotic currency and become part of cultural repertoires available for "new possibilities [of meme-making], even apparently pointless, nihilistic and playful forms of creativity" (105). The descriptors *absurd*, *pointless* or *nihilistic* locate playfulness outside the sphere of everyday life and rational grounds in accordance with Huizinga's view on play, but they also constitute a highly etic, detached perspective, which does not take into account the meaningfulness of meme work for those who participate in it.

Subsequent studies have explored the cultural production and social aspects of meme work on 4chan and Reddit (e.g. Bergsrom 2011; Knuttila 2011; Chen 2012; Manivannan 2012; Milner 2012; Massanari 2013; Vickery and Nelson 2013), in which the former inspired the platform (Krautchan) giving birth to Countryball memes in 2009 and the latter established one of the first aggregators of Countryball comics (2011), eventually garnering the largest amount of followers today (over 510,000 as of May 2019). The studies have noted that the distinctiveness and separateness of memes and meme work – however dispersed and fragmented – cements their social realities into a social fact. Prior to establishing meme generators and proliferation of memes on social networking sites and aggregators (roughly before 2010), as Phillips (2015) demonstrated in her long-term (auto)ethnographic study, memes and memetic practices (namely trolling) had been perceived and valued as cultural capital endemic to the communities and subcultures that produced them. Their members and followers have developed and cultivated niched infrastructures or 'playgrounds' where memes or memetic components and practices gained their own purchase based on 'distanced irony or critique' (Milner 2013a) and 'anticivility' (Manivannan 2012). Countryballs are said to originate in a similar fashion. Before evolving into a politically charged satire, nascent Countryball comics had been employed as a means of trolling in the form of a graphic diminution and disparagement of a Polish frequenter of the image board for the serious, nationalist tone in his boasting about his country (Polandball Wiki: "Polandball (meme)"; Know Your Meme 2010c: "Polandball").

The above-mentioned studies nevertheless point to ludic kernels embedded in the social fabric of meme-based niches. Organized around perpetual meme-related competition, the social life was marked predominantly by efforts to entertain or shock the anonymous audiences with creative use of expletives, salacious, scatological and juvenile references, and occasionally with instances of disturbing behaviors. The driving factor of play coincided with radical subversion and/or inversion of norms, rules, conventions and general expectations regarding civil social conduct. As the participants noted, most of these subversive practices were concerted and executed largely just for fun or 'for the lulz' (Milner 2013a). This has somewhat changed when memes started gaining traction on then-emerging social media (roughly between 2009 and 2012), which gave birth to new trajectories of use with perhaps more acceptable, 'softer' normative boundaries (given the less permissive publishing policies on social networking sites). The meme 'factories' on 4chan showed great discontent at the sight of losing their 'monopoly' on memes and memetic subcultures. The 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1980: 10), which enclosed and separated their ludic playgrounds from the rest of the web and conferred virtually 'sacred' status to meme work, was turning profane. Their long-cultivated memetic subculture was inevitably decentralized and merging with 'mainstream' Internet culture, dissolving into fragmented sites of memetic proliferation with disregard for their original references or normative expectations while rapidly exhausting their comic potential (Phillips 2015: Chapter 8). Losing their 'monopoly' on Internet memes, the communities split and re-organized around serious and clearly defined political causes and goals including Wikileaks, Anonymous, or, more recently, the 2016 American presidential elections. Some of the more radical wings and groups, now associated with the Alt Right and New Right, pursued anti-establishment and anti-mainstream ideologies espousing sexist, racist, xenophobic, separatist and other extremist policies (Nagle 2017).

Transiting to social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube, memes have been accommodated with predominantly light-hearted and humorous whimsicality, simplicity and repetitiveness together with other qualities making the memetic content also more easily recognizable, understandable and even inclined towards conviviality rather than anti-civility (e.g. Shifman 2011; Goriunova 2013), although exceptions can be found (e.g. Rintel 2013). Becoming part of social media and rising to prominence as a landmark of Internet culture at large, memes have become not only a visible marketable article (Phillips 2015: 139) but also a grassroots instrument for dislodging established political discourses and rhetoric (Stein 2012; Nowak 2013; Häkkinen and Leppänen 2014). The blurring lines between the ludic and serious use of memes started to gain academic attention as it problematized the conceptualization of memes (Shifman 2013a). More specifically, memes gained notoriety as a means of political resistance and constructing subaltern counter publics "where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1990: 67). It appeared that fun was no longer the end in itself in meme work, and that memetic humor has become instrumental to other, predominantly political motives (Pearce and Hajizada 2014: 68). Memes came to be seen as vehicles or voice of dissent as well as a pervasive and far-reaching instrument in advancing high-profile political causes in both democratic and non-democratic parts of the world, for example in

the Arab uprisings (Harlow 2013; Bratich 2014) or the Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner 2013b). The capacity of memes to document and comment on socio-political inequalities in conjunction with increased connectivity, visibility and uptake of social media has sparked serious academic interest in Internet memes (Miltner 2018) with one important corollary – it canonized memes as an effective, affordable and inexpensive tool in public activism and participation (Shifman 2014a).

However, this perspective has overshadowed the fact that memes and their rapid uptake have also generated new types of discursive spaces or playgrounds maintaining the ludic separateness and disinterestedness in changing socio-political or material realities. The subsequent literature on memes thus largely acknowledged but overlooked memes as a core feature of the translocally networked ludic playgrounds (Facebook pages, YouTube channels, Twitter accounts etc.) for producing, circulating and cultivating memes devoid of apparent goal apart from amusement (cf. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. 2017). The lack of research in the autotelic aspects of meme work had already been noted by Goriunova (2013) in her call to distinguish between idiocy (a performative mode of cultural production) and stupidity (a base or innate mode of thinking). Drawing attention to the relegation of popular memes and virally circulating content to superficial but somewhat humorous drivel, Goriunova coined the term 'new media idiocy' not to contest such derogatory interpretations, but rather to tease out how the 'funny and silly' performances gaining global traction on social media inform about the new techno-social modes of subjectivization and meaningful self-expression in political discourse. In the same vein, Häkkinen and Leppänen (2014) describe the ludic element in meme work on YouTube through the prism of Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque laughter – 'licensed' disruption and reshaping of hegemonic ideologies pervading political discourses and sociocultural trends. In their detailed analysis of memetic mashups and remixes of established political rhetorics and personas, the authors concur that meme-infused parody and satire offer a powerful tool for political critique and activism, but their aim is essentially ambiguous since they can be also used to merely entertain rather than completely undermine political messages and their objects.

As the following chapters will show, the Countryball genre provides ample resources for enacting the 'idiotic' mode of performance and expressing 'carnival sense of the world', that is, types of activities that enable and incentivize a ludic type of sociality. They reinvent serious geopolitical affairs in a seemingly inconsequential and child-like or juvenile manner, which brings together people of diverse (and perhaps unlikely) backgrounds in addition to encouraging communal levity, puerility and goofiness along with other behavioral traits unrelated to the gravity of everyday life, let alone formal and institutional discourses. This, of course, does not prevent coopting Countryballs into a form of political activism, but there is one important caveat to bear in mind. Although the notion of play might imply an everything-goes rationale (including disguised political activism) and a free-for-all kind of frivolity, it is in fact a highly normative and policed ingredient of the social dynamics that sustain the play in its local enactment (think of people who cheat or 'spoil' the play and the measures taken to prevent or punish such behavior). This brings us to the second dimension of Huizinga's notion of play – its orderliness.

2.2 Play as ordered activity

Huizinga notes that play constitutes essentially an order-making activity; it brings order "into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection" for which "it demands order absolute and supreme" (1980: 10). While the requirement for absoluteness and fixedness of rules in play is unattainable in the ever-shifting digital landscape, the ordered properties of memetic genres and discourses are hard to dismiss. In her highly influential *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman (2014) suggests that despite the unpredictability, multi-layeredness and apparent chaos in their variation and spread, Internet memes can be distinguished as

(i) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance;
(ii) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and
(iii) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*. (7-8, original emphasis)

In this perspective, memes offer presumably shared socio-cultural reservoirs of meaning provided in concise, commonly recognizable, and therefore normatively ordered patterns, whereby tracing the order in the composition of particular types of memes also means tracing a particular stances or views on social, cultural and political matters arresting public attention (Denisova 2019). A number of studies following this view have mapped the representation and framing of different voices and perspectives on predominantly contested topics, causes, events and other phenomena ranging from large-scale instances of civic participation such as elections (Ross and Rivers 2017), protests (Davis et al. 2016; Mina 2019), campaigns (Gal et al. 2016) or religious practices (Regiani and Borelli 2017) to singular mediatized incidents involving an unexpected turn or uptake (Wiggins 2019a). Evidenced by usually large corpora (hundreds of memetic instances), this body of works presents valuable and comprehensive accounts of linguistic, semiotic and discursive characteristics in relevant memes along the lines of stances or categories in their rendering of the matter at hand. However, the likewise ordered and normative categories or stances – even those labelled as humorous or ludic (e.g. Shifman 2014a: 79; Dynel 2016) – have been imputed to such sets of characteristics largely in accordance with assumed rather than examined awareness and ratification on the part of Internet users who engage with them in local contexts (cf. Miltner 2014).

Huizinga's attention to orderliness in play invites us to investigate how order is constructed and construed not only in terms of formal, genred categories of memes but also in terms of rather neglected domains of situated and interactional aspects of meme work – in what people actually do with memes and what kind of social effects it engenders in terms of their local significance. As open-ended semiotic material, memes and memetic resources circulate and traverse countless social niches in which they are presented in different semiotic configurations to different constellations of participants in different contexts affording different meanings and functions to them (Leppänen et al. 2014). One meme may thus bring radically different social effects and appraisal such as laughter and

endorsement as well as dismissal and outrage (Huntington 2017; Aslan and Vásquez 2018). Furthermore, not all participants have the same level of access to the socio-historical trajectories of memes regarding the preferences and expectations in their use, which may disqualify their communicative input as inadequate, inappropriate, trivial or transgressive in a given communicative situation. It is precisely when participants make their normative orientations explicit – when they make moral/epistemic judgments and value attributions – that we witness rectifications, explanations, negotiations, dismissals and other metapragmatic activities from which such orders transpire and speak to both local and translocal scales (Kytölä and Westinen 2015).

In order to uncover the ludic valency of memes, it is not enough to examine their rhetorical and visual compositions or variations (as e.g. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. 2017 would argue). It requires expanding our focus from referential meaning of memes (how memes render events, persons, ideas, institutions etc.) to indexical meaning of memes (how such renderings provide cues for their contextualization and interpretation) in connection with concrete and observable processes of invocation and ratifications of such meanings among participants in particular settings and interactions. Based on participants' own meta-communicative accounts of 'what is going on', we can identify the indexical ties to the ordered and presupposed histories of meaningful usage associated with particular memetic resources – their trajectories of use. In the case of Countryball memes, I postulate the following tentative hierarchy in the indexical orders (to borrow Silverstein's 2003 terminology): Countryball comics point to geopolitical realities and events (first indexical order) by virtue of reflexive mobilization and highlighting of linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources anchored in a wider contextual universe or sociocultural reservoir of Countryball register (second indexical order), which in turn points to an ideological, metapragmatic conceptualization – the satirical, play-genre of the meme-comics with its conventions of non-serious engagement (third indexical order).

The indexical orders nevertheless do not automatically translate into ludic normativity offering the same affordances and imposing the same constraints on communicative conduct in Countryball discourses and online spaces (or playgrounds) dedicated to it. Social media practices and interactions are heavily polycentric (e.g. Varis and Blommaert 2015; Leppänen et al. 2017; Blommaert 2018b); participants come from different backgrounds and orient to different complementary as well as conflicting normative criteria or orders, which might not necessarily be considered or recognized as ludic. The following chapters will illustrate the different nature of such orders and the outcomes of their enactment and violation. For now, let us note that ludic normativity (as one of such orders) cannot be taken for granted. It is subject to interactional achievement and comes into being every time participants enact it 'for another first time' (Garfinkel 1967: 9). Each Countryball platform or niche garners followers subscribing to the ways it adopts the format to cover different topics to pursue various goals. While the followers organized around individual platforms and niches usually overlap in their shared interest in Countryballs, each meme attracts a different constellation of participants who invoke, negotiate and ratify the ludic in different ways to different extents, some of which might be mutually exclusive. This brings us to the final dimension of play crucial for the present

work – the sense of groupness and communality it creates across the rhizomatic network of Countryball niches.

2.3 Play as community-making

It should now be clear that memes stand for more than powerful tools to express compliance or engage in subversion of norms, values and practices associated with various, predominantly political discourses (Gal et al. 2016; Al Zidjaly 2017). A relatively marginal line of research on memes as resources for individual as well as collective identity construction and performance on social media (cf. Miltner 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015; Milner 2012 on other online platforms) has noted that memetic practices also provide a means to locally engage with more loosely developing lifestyles, trends, causes or other interests of global relevance (Leppänen et al. 2014). Such alignments have been largely explored in terms of patterned interplay between content and form in memetic variations (Burgess et al. 2017) based on shared knowledge of intertextual and interdiscursive references embedded in memes (Laineste and Voolaid 2016; Yus 2018). This includes, for example, the role of memes in forming loose social relations through 'affective affinities' (Kanai 2016) or tailored curating, positioning and deploying memetic content in identity work (Du Preez and Lombard 2014).

Groups, communities and other forms of belonging or togetherness coalescing around such interests and discourses, however, remain at an abstract and general level of description – a mere implication stemming from various degrees of shared 'accent' (cf. Varis and Blommaert 2015: 40) that participants attach to memetic patterns and resources along the lines of identity categories, such as religious affiliation (Leppänen et al. 2014), sexuality (Gal et al. 2016), gender, class and race (Kanai 2016), prestige (Burgess et al. 2017) or ethnicity and nationality (Laineste and Voolaid 2016). And while such identity categories are certainly relevant in meme work, the groups and communities organized around Internet memes – much like the rest of social life characterized by the contemporary online-offline nexus (Blommaert 2018b) – point to the temporal and *ad hoc* character or meaning of such categories, which cannot be *a priori* assumed.

This work moves thus from the notion of community as preexisting, stable or presumed 'background' of meme work based around identity categories to *community-making* as *an effect* of play in order to potentiate a more adequate contextualization of the ludic sociality and diversity pertaining to Countryball memes. In this view, 'communities' (and other forms of belonging) emerge from and become sustained by the ordered activities participants engage in. Interestingly, Huizinga first mentions the notion of community with regard to those who break the ludic frame of play – those who do not acknowledge or intentionally violate the separateness and ordered nature of play (and its sociality). The 'spoilsports', as Huizinga calls them,

> must be cast out, for [spoilsports] threaten the existence of the *play-community*. […] It sometimes happens, however, that the spoilsports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret

> society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and *a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings* (Huizinga 1980: 11-12, my emphasis).

Huizinga's point corresponds with the granularity and structuring of play in what might be superficially called 'Countryball community' in a global sense. As Countryball comics were taking grounds in major social media and on social networking sites (e.g. *POLANDBALL* Facebook, *@polandball* on Twitter or *Polandball* on Google+ prior to its cancellation in 2019) and social aggregators of online content (e.g. *r/polandball* on Reddit, *polandballs* on 9Gag, *polandball* on Tumblr), different normative senses of 'what should carry where' (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 11) – what makes a good 'quality Countryball content' – began to develop along the differences in the techno-social infrastructures shaping content on given media. The stark contrast between the largest Countryball sites on Facebook and Reddit are sufficiently illustrative.

The main hub of Countryball content on Reddit (r/polandball) clearly defines the parameters of the comics that can be published therein (i.e. approved by the moderators). The reason is stated on the right sidebar description listing the rules for individual sites of interest (subreddits):

> Polandball is unique and it should remain so. It's clearly distinguished from rage comics and memes. Read the Official Polandball Tutorial. To keep the quality of the content high, all comics have to comply to it.

The Reddit-based tutorial along with the rules for commenting, and the 'wall of shame' littered with examples of poor or rules-violating comics have been put in place to 'dememefy' the comics; in other words, to cultivate an isolated ecology for creating and preserving its uniqueness (or 'sacredness' in Huizinga's vocabulary) mainly by preventing its proliferation into other formats and exhausting its comic potential. Reddit's rigorous content curation is enabled by directing nearly all Countryball content into one major subreddit, which is overseen by dedicated moderators whose gatekeeping practices have been described on Polandball Wiki as "strict and authoritarian by numerous people outside the website. It is sometimes referred to as fascism, both sarcastically and non-sarcastically" (Polandball Wiki: "/r/Polandball"; qtd in Hagen 2017: n.pag).

The strictness of Reddit's firm grip on Countryball comics came in response to the unstable flux and variability in the comics initially perpetuated by the first Countryball page on Facebook (*POLANDBALL*), which had emerged two years prior to the establishment of *r/polandball* subreddit in 2011. In these early years, some ground conventions (e.g. not using the circle tool in drawing countryball characters, Anglophone Countryballs not using 'broken' English, the Polandball character being always portrayed upside-down) have been set to foster the ludic and whimsical recognizability of the format. Yet even then, the *POLANDBALL* page has kept its characteristic leniency towards publishing non-orthodox Countryball comics, mixing Countryball resources with other memetic formats, as well as posting non-Countryball memetic content penetrating the digital mainstream.

This has been acknowledged in the 'about' section of *POLANDBALL* page in its answer to one of the frequently asked questions (FAQs) – 'why aren't u posting comics?':

> sometime post bullshit meme is more fun ^^ [indicating laughter] but we still are posting comic.

Contrary to the efforts to harness all Countryball content in one place and safeguard its 'quality' on Reddit, the *POLLANDBALL* page has endorsed some of the emerging offshoots ranging from national *Brazilball*, *Germanyball* or *Czechball* to regional (e.g. *Saxoniaball or Berlinball*), historical (e.g. *Yugoslaviaball* or *Prussiaball*) counterparts and other (e.g. *CommunistBall* or *Spaceball*) Countryball pages. Since the *POLANDBALL* page continues to be considered a normative authority of Countryball on Facebook (often referred to as 'uncle Polan' by the fans across Countryball-related pages), Polandball Wiki has noted that its "laissez-faire style has triggered both more popularity for the meme and concerns about its general direction" (Polandball Wiki: "Polandball on Facebook", n. pag.).

It will be later shown that these concerns are connected with maintaining and enacting ludic normativity both internally (within and across Countryball pages) and externally (its validation by Facebook policies and content moderating agents). From the internal perspective, the formally decentralized yet interconnected network of Countryball pages has witnessed organic normative development towards various, sometimes opposing directions within the community organized around the *POLANDBALL* page and across its numerous offshoot pages (e.g. Turkeyball page and its followers have been generally repudiated by other Countryball pages affiliated with *POLANDBALL* for exploiting the comics to promote aggressive nationalism, cf. Polandball Wiki: "Turkeyball"). From the external perspective, the ludic frivolity with which Countryball pages adopt the format is not always acknowledged by Facebook, usually on the grounds that it violates its hate speech policies against protected characteristics (notably nationality, ethnicity and religious faith) and using problematic symbols such as swastika (on the Naziball character). Moreover, the internal and external perspectives intertwine in the sense that the conflicts among individual pages and their followers do not transpire only in the comment sections, visitor posts and reviews tied to each page, but also in abusing the techno-social architecture of the platform. This includes targeted use of the report functionality enabling Facebook users to report content potentially violating Facebook's Community Standards[3], which may result in the suspension or removal of the content and its publisher.

The processes of negotiating ludic normativity are essentially grounded in a messy terrain interspaced with fluid and overlapping communities congregating around memes which are hardly determinable along the lines of the big social and demographic identity 'diacritics' such as gender, age, place of residence, class, religious affiliation etc. And yet,

[3] Facebook's content moderating agents (both human and non-human) involved in such decisions operate on a large scale without necessarily having access to the ludic background of the comics or the socio-historical trajectories of memes in general. I will address the implications of Facebook's takedowns of memetic content in Chapter 7.

despite the geographical, temporal, socio-cultural and other divides among participants, there is a palpable desire to secure the continuity of the Countryball phenomenon. Huizinga (1980: 12) notes that

> a play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. […] Feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.

The lingering effect of play is frequently observable in congregation work stimulated by each iteration of Countryball comics. Although Countryballs do not constitute or induce a *game* (i.e. a formalized type of play; a rule-based and/or procedurally-driven activity), their deployment is generally conducive to play (a ludic mode of interaction) inviting forms of participation that foster a sense of community and conviviality. The exact parameters and boundaries of play are, however, subject to negotiation upon each comic-post, but the histories of ludic experience of seeing and/or relating to the geopolitical realities become inscribed in communicative spaces dedicated to Countryballs. Moreover, the ludic histories extend beyond social and communal experience; they become part of participants' individual biographical trajectories archived on their profile histories (together with their other engagements on the site) and in the respective comment sections. It will be later demonstrated that the archives are generally viewed as communal heritage worth protecting, which testifies to perceived sharedness of ludic attunement to the comics. Although this sharedness varies with different ideas about its normative aspects, it is sufficient enough to generate the primary object of the present analytical focus – corrective or vigilante-like responses upon perceived disruption of ludic normativity.

2.4 Play as an action-oriented approach to ludic normativity

Having outlined the main ingredients of play as a ludic mode of (inter)action, it can now be situated in a larger, action-based methodological framework for examining the processes of negotiating ludic normativity in memetic communities. The four lines of sociolinguistic methodology laid down by Blommaert (2017) will be central to the case of Countryball memes in the following theses:

(i) Countryball memes afford ludic patterns of communication that involve meaningful social relationships as an expectation,[4] conduit and outcome.
(ii) Such relationships will always, similarly, involve ludic identities and categorizations, interactionally established.

[4] Although Blommaert (2017) writes about the involvement of meaningful social relationships as a 'prerequisite' in patterns of communication from a general sociolinguistic point of view, I am here more inclined to consider such relationships as an 'expectation' since the ludic sociality and its meaningfulness in Countryball discourses emerges interactionally, on an ad hoc basis, rather than being an *a priori* condition.

(iii) Thus, when observing patterns of communication, we are observing the very essence of sociation and "groupness" – regardless of how we call the 'groups'.
(iv) And specific patterns of interaction shape specific forms of memetic communities.

In other words, memetic communities will be approached as *constituted by the actions they are involved in* and ludic normativity as *an interactionally co-constructed social fact organizing communicative practices and social life in such communities*. This understanding of action draws on action-centered sociology developed in the works of Goffman (1974, 1981), Cicourel (1964, 1972, 1992), Blumer (1969), Garfinkel (1967, 2002) and Bourdieu (1977, 1991) informing advances in contemporary interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic ethnography (e.g. Rampton et al. 2014; Snell 2015; Pérez-Milans 2016; Rampton 2017; Blommaert 2018b; Blommaert et al. 2019). This anchoring will be specified and developed in the following chapters, but it can already be highlighted that the point of departure in this work are socio-communicative actions rather than social actors participating in these actions or social systems where the actions take place. The focus on action – on how memes inflect the processes of meaning-making, building social relations or performing identities – entails three significant dimensions relevant to social and communicative conduct pertaining to play, namely separateness, order and community.

Despite their increasing presence and gradual accommodation in the digital mainstream (social media in particular), memes constitute highly concise means of communication distinct from standardized or codified communicative resources, such as language varieties or predefined emoticons and emojis provided by online social platforms and messaging tools (but see Lu 2018). The distinctiveness lies in the open-ended nature of memetic variation, which is, nevertheless, conditioned by its ties to socio-cultural reservoirs and flows from which they originate or refer to, and which imbue them with typically humorous, satirical, ironic, absurd or irrational layers of meanings replete with connotations and undertones prone to generating ludic effects (Katz and Shifman 2017). Because of the richness of intertextual and interdiscursive meanings attached to their ever-shifting multimodal make-up, memes have been described as 'cultural metalanguage' (Van Wynsberghe 2017) which is recognizably *separated* from 'mundane' forms of communication on one hand, and which *separates* Internet users according to their access to memetic reservoirs and flows on the other (Nie 2018), including their ability to recognize or participate in communicative events involving memes. When it comes to Countryball memes, the ludic dimension of separateness rests on willing acknowledgment and interactional engagement predicated on separation from the 'ordinary' life in behavioral expectations, as well as inconsequentiality of its outcomes.

The distinct or 'marked' nature of Internet memes constitutes a form of normativity or order. While this order is usually identifiable on the level of patterns in formal properties or features and their semiotic arrangements that make memes recognizable as memes or instances of a particular memetic genres, another (and less explored) type of order arises out of participants' discursive orientations to Internet memes, as well as in social encounters instigated by memes. In so far as memes reflect countless issues related to society, politics and culture, they also attract responses to and ratification of the ways

they convey and frame such issues. Moreover, specific memetic genres like Countryballs consist of not only formal characteristics distinguishable in their iterations but also expectations regarding responsive behavior and communicative conduct, be it a specific type of humor or identity performance. The ludic element in such expectations surfaces clearly in their violation – most notably when they are taken 'seriously'. However, the scope and shape of the ludic normativity remain subject to situational negotiation and ratification among diverse participants dispersed across polycentric mediascape.

Finally, the recognizability of memetic resources and their ludic indexicalities invites likewise ludic forms and modes of (inter)action, which give birth to *ad hoc* (play-)communities arising out of congregational work around memes. Social cohesion of such 'light communities' emanates from perceived sharedness in discursive orientation or attunement to particular types of normativities associated with particular types of memes produced and reproduced as part of "communicatively organized and ratified set of social relations" (Blommaert 2018c: 68). Memetic communities coalesce around memetic artifacts precisely in the concrete and observable patterns of communicative acts through which participants relate to memes and to one another in the communicative spaces generated by memes. Combined with ethnographic attention to the socio-historical trajectories of contextualization of memetic resources, the action-oriented perspective enables us to capture the most minute, microscopic details of this relational work in memetic encounters, and how they feed into larger, macroscopic communal or societal phenomena or structures in the dynamic digital environments without having to take predefined or 'known' individuals or groups as a starting point. The next chapter details the ethnographic backdrop of the action-oriented methodology used in this work.

CHAPTER 3

Methodological preliminaries

Having discussed the well-documented role of Internet memes in co-constructing various (predominantly political) discourses and the less explored evidence of their capacity to shape the social realities forming around them, I now turn to the methodological approaches, issues and limitations in examining this capacity in the case of Countryball memes on Facebook from an ethnographically oriented perspective.

As previously stated, Countryball memes traverse countless Facebook pages operating effectively as networked social niches with different normative orientations and ambiguous 'relationship' with the mediating platform. Addressing the ways in which participants negotiate ludic normativity within and across such niches then coincides with broader questions and issues in ethnographic studies of digital communication, such as

> […] how discourse circulates in networks, how selves (as discursive constructions become instantiated in webs, how the nodes and ties of networks are created and strengthened through the moment by moment conduct of social interaction, and how people 'talk' with algorithms. (Jones 2016: 235; qtd. in Varis and Hou 2020: 231)

In what follows, I will outline some of the key insights, principles and incentives pursued by a strand of such approaches labeled as 'digital ethnography' (Varis 2016; Varis and Hou 2020). This will provide foundational elements for a wider methodological framework informed by contemporary efforts to adjust interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography and applied linguistics to communication in digital environments (e.g. Rampton 2015; Blommaert 2018c; Pennycook 2018).

3.1 Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography builds on earlier attempts to arm computer-mediated discourse studies with ethnographic sensitivity to the contexts of the communicative actions and social practices as they unfold in globalized, translocal and technologically mediated (rather than determined) environments (e.g. Scollon and Scollon 2004; Jones and Norris 2005; Androutsopoulos 2008; Kytölä and Androutsopoulos, 2012; Leppänen et al. 2015; cf. Jones et al. 2015). It provides an adaptable research perspective on digital communication with ontological and epistemological underpinnings derived from anthropology and predicated on the understanding of language as just one of many semiotic resources

inseparable from larger socio-cultural patterns and social situations in which they are mobilized, and through which they gain meaning and value (Hymes 1996). On that note, ethnography converges with Bakhtin's philosophy of language (1981, 1986) centered on its organic and social nature – a view in which meaning emerges from dialogic interactions taking place in specific circumstances. Consequently, it is these interactional circumstances and their histories that give birth to the normative aspects of communication rather than ahistorical, abstract and idealized structures (much in the sense of De Saussure's 'langue').

Central to digital ethnography (and to this work) is thus a critical perspective on how participants construct and construe contexts as they "use language, interact with each other, employ discourses and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies" (Varis and Hou 2020: 230). The present work is therefore concerned with *contextualization* rather than context (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 66-72; Auer and Di Luzio 1992). The processes of contextualization guide our attention to the involvement of memes in socially ratified modes of action manifested in the linguistic and semiotic choices of those who engage with them, and subsequently in the effects of their ludic (mis)recognition. Since ethnography in this sense constitutes a perspective or approach instead of a standardized method or set of techniques, the ethnographic orientation of the present work needs to be clarified first. The use of ethnography as an analytical perspective rests on three key principles: situatedness, reflexivity and induction. Let us start with the latter.

3.2 Induction

Ethnography is an inductive science focusing on behavior taking place within specific social situations, including behavior shaped by affordances and constraints of these situations and people's understanding and interpretation of their experiences. Unlike its research counterparts based on deduction, ethnography proceeds from empirical evidence towards theory. The main argument of this work follows the same trajectory. Put simply, based on my systematic observation of participants' comments on Countryball memes in their naturally occurring settings (comment sections in Facebook Countryball pages), I derive empirical evidence of ludic patterns in participants' communicative behavior, which translates into an overarching theory that Countryball memes are conducive to ludic sociality. In this theory, ludic sociality coincides with 'play' as one of 'background expectancies' (Garfinkel 1967: 36) or a normative mode of social engagement to which participants may subscribe, according to which they may organize and evaluate their experience (Goffman 1963), and which becomes explicit upon its violation. To demonstrate this theory, I will present four case studies consisting of detailed accounts of participants' responding to perceived threats or violations of the ludic 'background expectancies' with particular attention to their normative claims and negotiations in interactional work instigated by particular meme-posts.

Needless to say, the fact that data gathering and interpreting necessarily precede formulation of hypotheses and theories has continually attracted criticism of the reliability

and validity of ethnographic findings compared to those from research traditions grounded in positivism, most notably in social science disciplines (e.g. LeCompte and Goetz 1982; Blommaert and Van de Vijver 2013; see Hammersley and Atkinson 2007 for an overview). In lieu of relying on a controlled environment limiting extraneous variables and factors or adhering to strictly statistical methods and measurements concerned with representativeness (cf. Cicourel 1964), ethnography is geared towards a holistic approach *emphasizing* the unconstrained interplay among variables in naturalistic settings. For this reason, ethnography does not assume *a priori* constructs or relationships. And therein resides its importance for this work, for it facilitates new connections between concepts and notions as well as refinement of analytical categories in order to potentiate a more precise account of the complexities of the dynamic digital niches organized around (Countryball) memes, and the ludic threads of their social realities. However, before delving into details, it is necessary to spell out the practicalities of data collection, sampling and my position as a researcher on the basis of which the data are contextualized and theorized.

Digital environments pose a number of challenges to traditional ethnographic enterprise based on fieldwork commonly invested in participant observation and interview (Hine 2013; Varis 2016: 62). Meme-based and related niches in particular usually garner large volumes of followers (from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands 'likes' in the case of Countryball Facebook pages) dispersed across mediascape. Furthermore, each meme attracts different aggregate of participants with little or no signs of regularity in participation and with predominantly loose and temporal connection to the sites (Varis and Blommaert 2015) devoid of 'offline' organization in a communal sense (e.g. gatherings, conventions, reunions or festivals). Social hierarchies and roles or relationships among participants are consequently negotiated *ad hoc* and are likely to pertain only to a particular comment section. The transitory and fragmented nature of comment sections co-constructed by migratory participants makes it difficult if not impossible to get a hold of participants or recruit informants for a 'fully-fledged' ethnographic commitment to data collection in which part of the data is obtained through active collaboration with participants who would subsequently (in)validate or reflect on the findings (e.g. Kytölä and Androutsopoulos 2012). Apart from general issues related to this line of inquiry (i.e. informant bias, participants' unwillingness to cooperate, possibility of deliberate misleading – especially in ludic-oriented settings etc.), there are also digital constraints (e.g. the absence or limited access to socio-demographic information, technical issues, disembodied contact devoid of paralinguistic and non-verbal cues, restricted connectivity[5] and so on).

As a result, one of the principles of digital-ethnographic tradition – the combination of 'screen-based' observations with face-to-face, offline interviews with particular social actors (e.g. Hine 2000; Markham 2005) – is excluded from the present research design. In view of the dispersed and transitory nature of participants' communicative engagements,

[5] Reaching out to prospective informants on social networks, especially Facebook, might be limited by their privacy settings on users' accounts precluding any contact attempts or marking them as a spam, whereby the targeted user might be not be notified at all.

and given the action- rather than actor-centered (or participant-centered) nature of the present approach, my position as a researcher thus gravitates towards 'screen-based' ethnographic engagement (Androutsopoulos 2013) relying on systematic online observation without contacting participants and without responding or otherwise reacting to their comments. Although the observation consisted of regular visits to the pages and cross-checking with other sources (Polandball Wiki, Know Your Meme and Countryball-based niches on other platforms), the focus of such visits changed over time according to the case study in question (see the table below).

Case study	Period and observed page	Topic	Observed activity	Focus	Data selected for in-depth analysis
0	2014 – 2016 *POLANDBALL*	Greek Debt Crisis; Scottish Independence Referendum; US-Philippines relations	Reiteration of national and cultural stereotypes	Disparagement humor as a socially cohesive device	3 posts 31 comments
1	2016 – 2018 *Czechball*	2017 Czech Parliamentary Elections, response to suspending *POLANDBALL* page	Comparing *Czechball* page against *POLANDBALL* page	Articulating ludic normativity	2 posts 13 comments
2	2017 (Feb – Mar) *Polandball 2.0*	Mass collaboration in rebuilding then-suspended *POLANDBALL* page	Rectifications and reflections on perceived divergences from Countryball format	Policing ludic normativity	3 posts 12 comments
3	2017 *POLANDBALL* and *Czechball*	Political responses to the European Migrant Crisis	Attacking the ludic portrayal of the Crisis	Breaking ludic normativity	2 posts 89 comments
4	2018-2019 *POLANDBALL* and *Czechball*	Censoring Countryball comics	Responses to adaptations in Countryball format in order to avoid censorship	Re-constructing ludic normativity	3 posts 21 comments

Table 1. A timeline of research design

Starting in 2014, I become interested in mapping the linguistic contours of Countryball register with respect to participants' relational work in their reiteration of national and cultural stereotypes native to particular Countryballs, including its effects on solidifying social cohesion among participants on the *POLANDBALL* page (case study 0). The comments showed consistently positive uptake of the disparagement humor pervading Countryball memes manifested in palpable conviviality and consonance among diverse participants populating the comment sections in their relational work towards the comics and one another (Procházka 2016).

This prompted me to theorize a ludic interactional order (i.e. normativity) behind much of their interactional work, and to construct the research design of the present work that had paved the way for the following four case studies. The studies focus on relatively rare cases of rupture marked by conflicts, disagreements or inquiries among participants with regard to what they considered as 'correct' or 'appropriate' when it comes to Countryball comics and communicative conduct in Countryball-based niches on Facebook. Moreover, seeing that the Countryball phenomenon had inspired a number of offshoot pages on Facebook, I shifted my attention to the *Czechball* page dedicated to (re)interpreting predominantly Czech-related (geo)political affairs to global audiences.

Moving to the *Czechball* page provided me with opportunities to see how participants make the ludic expectancies explicit by measuring its local enactments against that of the global and historically central *POLANDBALL* page (case study 1), and how such expectancies create effects of inclusion and exclusion. In doing so, participants lay bare the translocal and heteroglossic facets of Countryball resources against the backdrop of their socio-historical trajectories traversing Countryball niches. The fact that participants' normative-evaluative claims reach beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of their interactional work and the discursive space of the *Czechball* page poses a necessity for a dynamic, multi-scalar and multi-layered view of context in meme-based environments. This is enabled by the analytical toolkit offered by sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert 2010) in conjunction with the theory of translocality (Leppänen et al. 2009).

The second case study covers an intensive two-week long period from early 2017 when the *POLANDBALL* page had been suspended. In this period, more than 50 Countryball pages, including the *Czechball* page, joined their efforts to rebuild it under the name *Polandball 2.0*. Coming from different backgrounds, participants displayed different degrees of access to the contextual universe of Countryball resources with significant bearings on the ratification of their communicative inputs (Procházka 2018a). The second case study introduces the notion of memetic vigilantism as a semiotically-oriented alternative to a similar, derogatory term 'Grammar Nazi' in order to address different socio-historical trajectories of Countryball resources converging in the nexus of *Polandball 2.0*. Seeing the project of *Polandball 2.0* as part of a joint attempt to restore and reinforce the 'original' normative blueprints of the Countryball genre, the acts of memetic vigilantism have enabled me to capture the range of semiotic nuances that become subject to normative-evaluative incursions in the comment sections. In addition, the concept of chronotope (Bakhtin 1981; Blommaert 2015a) is adopted to nuance the spatiotemporal conditions for meaning-making and identity work invoked by participants as they police the semiotic make-up of Countryball memes and communicative conduct of others to uphold the ludic normative order in accordance with its original blueprints.

The third case study concentrates on satirical portrayals of the political rift in the EU about dealing with the European Migrant crisis on both *POLANDBALL* and *Czechball* pages. Simondon's theory individuation (1989, 2006) is used here to expand the concept of chronotope to account for the volatile and scaled tensions between ludic and serious uptake of Countryball memes, including the consequences of intentionally breaking the ludic normativity (Procházka 2019a). Finally, the fourth case study revisits the concepts of communicative competence and community in the light of the increasing intensity of

Facebook's content moderating mechanisms encroaching on meme-based pages, including both *POLANDBALL* and *Czechball* (Procházka 2019b). Drawing on a posthumanist perspective in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics (Pennycook 2018), I will demonstrate that negotiation of ludic normativity can be seen more adequately as an interplay between human and non-human, automated agency through the prism of participants' reclaiming the ludic normativity in compliance with the content moderation practices.

Taken together, the four studies present a coherent view of ludic normativity as an interactional achievement accomplished in transitory communicative spaces by migratory participants. The core unit of analysis consists of a meme and its comment section with particular focus on participants' comments on communicative behavior and normativity. Such comments point directly to the reflexive and situated nature of language use and semiotic choices in general. The following sections will briefly explain the principles of reflexivity and situatedness from an ethnographic perspective as key components of the analytical lenses employed in the present work.

3.3 Situatedness

The ethnographic principle of situatedness stems from the observation that "not every form of communication is performed or performable in any situation" (Blommaert 2015b: 9). Memes are essentially communicative resources with sociocultural and historical load that has immediate bearings on their usability and performability, i.e. what can be achieved or communicated in particular situations.[6] But even in social niches dedicated to publishing and circulating memes, there are differences in the traditions, genres and formats which impose limits on the scope of acceptability, intelligibility and expectations regarding particular memes by their audiences. Countryball Facebook pages in particular circulate iterations of Countryball format and occasionally other (geo)politically relevant memes, which leaves cues about the normative aspects of their formal characteristics. The sensitivity to their situated effects reveals what kind of values and functions are attributed to them, and subsequently what is actually achieved with memetic resources in a given situation.

The ethnographic attention to situatedness sensitizes us to the inseparability of the communicative acts and metacommunicative perceptions including ideas and interpretations of such acts; in other words, how both using memes *and* responding to memes become subject to curation, policing and ratification, and how such practices translate into power relations and inequality among participants. Similarly to other communicative

[6] Using memes or meme-related materials without considering or acknowledging their ludic histories can go horribly wrong. Recent example include Hungarian government's 2019 campaign aimed to boost 'traditional' family values. The campaign used posters and billboards complete with stock images of 'happy couple' without realizing that the models had also been featured in another series of stock images going viral under the name 'distracted boyfriend' originally titled "disloyal man walking with his girlfriend and looking amazed at another seductive girl" (Know Your Meme 2017a: "Distracted Boyfriend", n. pag.). Being immediately recognized by meme-savvy citizens, the campaign was quickly met with an avalanche of mockery and sarcastic memes (Walker 2019).

resources, memes are subject to the dynamics of availability and accessibility; and therefore inequality, since not everyone has the same degree of access to all available memetic resources native to particular niches or genres (cf. Hymes 1996: Chapter 3). The inequalities then transpire in different and sometimes contradictory ways in which memes are rendered meaningful by participants in interactional work, some of which might be seen as transgressive or out-of-place. The interactions involving appraisal and evaluative remarks are of special interest. They show the range of acceptability in iterativity and creativity as far as memetic genres are concerned. By examining the unique situatedness of interactions prompted by memetic artifacts, especially those marked by metacommunicative involvement, we can observe generic recognizability of actions – how they acquire normative status over time in connection with the constantly changing social environments in which they are enacted and interpreted. This also has consequences for the validity of examples in an ethnographic analysis that rests

> on the fact that through and beyond their unique situatedness, we can spot the larger, historical genre template for such social actions. Every instance of social action is evidently unique, *but only to a degree*. For it is also generic, and in that sense always a token of a type, 'representative' of that type. The genre theory, therefore, can be seen as the grounding for an ethnography that satisfies *both* the demand for ecological validity and for representativeness. (Blommaert 2018b: 56, original emphasis)

Herein lies the core of the analytical focus in the present work – participants' meta-level reflections on the situatedness of memetic resources involving non-elicited, naturally occurring interactions provoked by participants' own inquiries or responses to perceived violations of genred expectations. It points not only towards what is generally recognizable among participants regarding particular spatiotemporal conditions and demands on social and communicative conduct along with relevant memetic genres but also to secure ecological validity of the findings. Although the issue of representativeness has not been of great concern for ethnographic enterprise in contrast to the deduction-based scientific disciplines and perspectives (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 33; Blommaert and Dong 2010; cf. Cicourel 1964), the attention to situatedness and reflexivity of communication facilitates generalizability and representativeness in terms of the theories it generates.[7]

Finally, it should also be kept in mind that in the algorithm-driven digital environments, the attention to the situatedness of Internet-based communication must account for the influence of codes, protocols and defaults managing the visibility, accessibility and sequences in which we navigate digital worlds and interactions therein. In the words of Van Dijck (2013: 29):

[7] Instead of 'representative sampling' based on gathering and structuring data in order to obtain sufficiently representative sample of predefined population segments against the backdrop of already existing theories and hypotheses, ethnographically oriented approaches usually opt for 'theoretical sampling' associated with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), whereby data are collected, selected and analyzed according to their representativeness of the theories as they emerge. This includes developing, refining and potentially discovering new relationships and associations as well as conceptual ideas and categories.

> Online sociality has increasingly become a coproduction of humans and machines […] [A] platform [like Facebook, YouTube or Wikipedia] […] shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them. Technologically speaking, platforms are the providers of software, (sometimes) hardware, and services that help code social activities into a computational architecture; they process (meta)data through algorithms and formatted protocols before presenting their interpreted logic in the form of user-friendly interfaces with default settings that reflect the platform owner's strategic choices. (qtd. in Rampton 2014: 11)

The situated character of memetic resources thus attests not only to the socio-communicative preferences and expectations regarding memetic genres and niches in question but also to larger, underlying expectations of the platform itself, often inscribed in the code of conduct (e.g. Community Standards on Facebook). What this means for the ludic sociality enveloping Countryball and perhaps other meme-based niches located on Facebook is that their routines and practices might not be acknowledged as compliant with the Facebook Community Standards. This might – and often does – result in their circumscription by content moderating mechanisms enacted by the platform. The emphasis on contextualization in digital ethnography then enables us to track the shifts and changes in memetic flows as part of negotiating ludic normativity in the light of diverging expectations and normative ideals. Participants of course notice and discuss instances of content curation and accommodation in order to maintain generic recognizability within the purview of Community Standards, including exploiting the changing technicalities and functionalities that shape the communicative interface. In a more technical vocabulary, by analyzing contextualization of such adjustments and changes in view of their situatedness, we witness "active [processes] of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance […]" (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 69). And here we touch upon the reflexive nature of linguistic-communicative practices – the third key principle guiding the ethnographic lenses employed in this work.

3.4 Reflexivity

The reflexive nature of language generally refers to the human capacity "to use language to communicate about the activity of using language" (Lucy 1993: 9). One of the important implications is that we are able to evaluate, judge and frame our communicative choices. In fact, we do so all the time on the basis of constant monitoring and feedback embedded in a wide array of cues ranging from most minute bodily or linguistic nuances to elaborate metalinguistic and metacommunicative systems (grammars, codes, etiquettes, genres, rituals etc.) against which such appraisals are made (Bateson 1972).[8]

[8] Other relevant classic works on this subject include also Goffman (1974, 1981) in sociology; Geertz (1973) in anthropology, as well as Jakobson (1956, 1957) in linguistics and literary studies with direct influence on the ethnographically oriented research addressing reflexivity in language use, most notably in Hymes (1974: 9-24).

Similarly for Bakhtin (1981), reflexivity is present in every word or utterance (i.e. unit of meaning), for it is coated in histories of its prior uses by others that endow it with dialogic anticipation.

Put otherwise, every time we use language (or any other semiotic system) we generate meaning by choosing certain communicative resources over others and putting them together in some ways rather than others. Choice-making then characterizes both meaning production and interpretation as part of contextualization.[9] As Verschueren notes, "while not all choices are equivalent (some may be more marked than others), they always evoke or carry along their alternatives by way of contrast" (2012: 51). It is through this contrast that we are able to construct ludic spaces and enact ludic modes of action distinct from 'the ordinary' precisely by making communicative choices indicative or emblematic of 'play' (Huizinga 1980: 7-14).

However, before specifying the individual cues that instigate or 'give away' the ludic sociality in the case of Countryballs, let us take a look at the relationship between reflexivity and pragmatics against the backdrop of ethnography and its focus on contextualization. Blommaert succinctly formulates this relationship as follows:

> Every utterance not only says something in itself (i.e. about the world, about an extralinguistic referent of some kind), but it also says something about itself, and hence, every 'pragmatics' (every way of handling language) goes hand in hand with a 'metapragmatics' (comments about, and references to, the way of handling language). At the same time and through this reflexive dimension, it amends overly linear or static views of context, adding an important praxis-related dimension to text-context relationships. (2005: 48)

The link between (meta)pragmatics and reflexivity has a long tradition in anthropologically framed linguistics and more recently also sociolinguistics (Silverstein 1976, 1993; Lucy 1993; Agha 2005, 2007b; Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Rampton 2011; see Kytölä 2013: 101-103 for an overview). It has been predominantly concerned with reflections of metapragmatic awareness with which people categorize and evaluate language varieties, as well as linguistic styles and forms, mostly in connection with language ideologies and identity construction (e.g. Coupland and Jaworski 2004; Schieffelin 2007). Today, metapragmatic reflexivity grows to be a vital component in the line of research on how language use itself becomes an object of discourse on social media (e.g. Heyd 2014; Kytölä and Westinen 2015; Stæhr 2015, 2017; Higgins et al. 2017). But when it comes to multimodal artifacts like Internet memes and communities forming around them on social media, reflexivity needs to be approached more broadly since people handle more than language in their engagements with memes and memetic discourses (Donzelli and Bugden 2019).

Reflexivity, needless to say, coincides with communicative actions also in their wider, semiotic sense. For example, research on contemporary characterology of selfies and

[9] In the eyes of Bakhtin, "the word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (1981: 284).

other newly emerging social media genres clearly shows that, besides linguistic properties, social media users orient to and evaluate shapes, colors, typography, sounds, choreographies and other semiotic elements and modes, including their composition and presentation co-created by media affordances, ideologies and functionalities (e.g. Georgakopoulou 2016; Hou 2018; Li 2018) – all of which potentially having significant ramifications for the understanding and appraisal of authenticity, membership or the self. And Internet memes are no exception (Mohr and Sarfaraz 2018).

Indeed, participants in memetic niches such as Countryball Facebook pages express, affirm and act on various assumptions and ideas about communicative preferences and expectations spanning a number of semiotic modalities and concern moments as well as places of their deployment. Ethnography brings a critical incentive to account for reflexivity in this broader sense, addressing the ways in which semiotic choices and their arrangements are contextualized[10] in the light of particular participant frameworks, institutional settings and their socio-historical dimensions and ideological aspects (e.g. Scollon and Scollon 2003, 2004; Goodwin and Goodwin 2004; Goodwin 2007).[11]

Thus, in order to gain deeper insights into the contextual unfolding of the actions which involve normative claims and negotiations, the present work adopts an ethnographically sensitive approach to metapragmatic reflexivity guiding our attention to spatiotemporal, multimodal and multisemiotic properties invoked or implied by participants. Starting with participants' metapragmatic appraisal and discussions about 'correct', 'appropriate' or 'acceptable' use and interpretation of memetic resources, the intersection between (immediate) communicative and (historical) metacommunicative levels opens up and allows us to identify and derive the normative patterns on a broader scope and scale. More specifically in the case of Countryballs, attention moves towards the ways in which communicative choices and acts are contributing or challenging the local (re-)production of the ludic sociality. Here, metapragmatic reflexivity points to participants' awareness of how socio-communicative actions proceed, should proceed and can proceed in specific social environments, while the ethnographic lenses help us uncover the indexical ties and relevance to the translocal assumptions and ideas about the actions and their normative grounding beyond the communicative event itself. The connection between concrete actions and their 'oughtness' opens to scrutiny as it operates

> within large stratified complexes in which some forms of semiosis are systematically perceived as valuable, others as less valuable and some are not taken into account at all, while all are subject to rules of access and regulations as to circulation. (Blommaert 2010: 38).

[10] The dynamic relationship between context and reflexivity has also been an important concern for Garfinkel's (2002) ethnometodological enterprise: "actions continuously generate the context within which they are produced and that shapes them. Context does not describe a clearly delineated environment where action occurs, rather context itself is *reflexively* constituted by virtue of the relationships between actions and the way in which participants specify aspects of identity, time, and space" (Vom Lehn 2014: 105, original emphasis).

[11] In fact, much of the work done by the Scollons and Goodwins has informed recent attempts to revisit social and sociolinguistic theory and method *vis-à-vis* contemporary, digitally-driven societies and communicative infrastructures (Blommaert 2015, 2018; Pennycook 2018).

Revealing the normative criteria and orders through metapragmatic reflexivity becomes instrumental not only in examining how memetic resources gain their ludic meaning and value in particular memetic niches but also how such meanings and values are distributed and (mis)recognized across other niches and platforms, and how this contributes to, for example, the social effects of inclusion and exclusion.

Finally, participants' normative orientations transpiring in the negotiations of ludic normativity of Countryball niches are increasingly affected by the bounds of technological architectures and policies of platforms on which they are published. In this vein, the range of acceptability or appropriateness of ludic normativity comes under review by automated procedures enforcing such policies, in addition to the interpersonal and communal negotiation. As already noted, digital ethnography takes into consideration the situated character of socio-communicative actions and discursive orientations as a matter of human-technological rather than merely interpersonal relations (Varis and Hou 2020: 236; cf. Gourlay et al. 2013; Poulsen et al. 2018). Sharing this alignment, it would be impossible for the present approach to view Facebook and its technological defaults, functionalities and interface as a neutral, passive tool for publishing (Countryball) memes or a carrier of online content shared by others. On the contrary, Facebook enters the negotiations of ludic normativity by virtue of its affordances, design, policies and content moderation circumscribing the 'playgrounds' or the boundaries of ludic action. It operates as a final authority in assessing the acceptability of published content while its menacing capacity to delete content and suspend content creators has a clear effect on socio-communicative behavior of its users. The very object of our analysis – metapragmatically reflexive actions – are consequently inseparable from the techno-social infrastructure co-created by Facebook, and so this infrastructure becomes implied in any type of (ludic) normativity it enables. The final case study in this work will show how digital ethnography can help us to shed light on Facebook as a normative actor through the eyes of its users, and what it means for our understanding of traditional terms like communicative competence and community.

Let us, however, start with the first case study showing how participants articulate the ludic contours and normative boundaries of the Countryball register on the *Czechball* page in comparison with the original *POLANDBALL* page. This will provide a fertile ground for introducing the core of our analytical vocabulary and its development in the chapters to follow.

CHAPTER 4

‘POLANDBALL can into more funny’: Articulating ludic normativity

Interest-driven social media are witnessing a rise in a new type of flexible collectivities organized around Internet memes (Varis and Blommaert 2015). It is important to highlight that memes are spreading around the web through recontextualization processes, such as resemiotization and entextualization (Rymes 2012; Leppänen et al. 2014; Valdez et al. 2017), enabling possibilities to engage with and make sense of translocal and transcultural flows in local social niches and collectivities coalescing around them. This chapter concentrates on Countryball meme pages as one of such collectivities. Both memes and interactions pertaining to the meme pages usually draw on the semiotic resources of the Countryball genre – and their ludic indexicality – to relate to or render the local realities of socio-cultural and political life in ways that are significant beyond their local (i.e. regional, linguistic, cultural, social and other) boundaries. This means that the published content on the Countryball pages becomes recognizable, interesting or otherwise note-worthy for participants of different backgrounds with different normative expectations and orientations. Through their interactions, they negotiate and weave together new, multi-layered and emergent normative orders against a backdrop of the ludic normativity tied to the Countryball genre. In doing so, they lay bare the sociolinguistic inequalities that may result in the social effects of inclusion and exclusion.

I will address two types of sociolinguistic inequality. The first results from the fact that people travel (browse) across various social media platforms. Participants encounter and align with a number of emergent as well as stable and institutionalized norms, expectations and preferences in communicative behavior within different localities, such as Countryball meme pages. Of course, not all of such alignments are not recognized as legitimate, valid or acceptable in particular social niches located in the contemporary polycentric digital mediascapes. Different communicative competences and normative alignments might subsequently become a basis on which participants can be ridiculed, denigrated or disqualified in a particular communicative environment, but also grounds for enrichment, adjustments or change of the normative expectations pertaining to the environment. The second type of sociolinguistic inequality lies in the realization that communicative resources (both linguistic and semiotic) travel as well. Resources that are constitutive or otherwise linked to Internet memes fall victim to frequent recontextualizations as they go viral, and their meaning and value do not stay the same. Meaning in context, as Blommaert notes, dialectically emerges “as value effects derived from local enactments of historically loaded [communicative] resources” (2015: 108). It is the historical load – the

ludic indexicality or blueprints for social action – that creates layered and stratified patterns of values of communicative resources, which is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated in social interactions in its local enactments with considerable bearings on interpersonal (power) relations among participants that need to be accounted for in analysis.

Thus, concentrating on the metapragmatically reflexive actions in conflicts among participants, this chapter will examine *how participants articulate and enact ludic normativity in the Czechabll page*. By focusing on grassroots normative policing, the chapter aims to explore not only the pre-existing, translocal normative expectations but also the dynamics of shaping and negotiating the relationship between form, function and meaning of communicative resources upon their local, situated recontextualization in *Czechball* page. More specifically, the *Czechball* page is here approached as a local sociolinguistic system with its own historicity, patterns of experience and normative conduct, which are, nevertheless, infused with translocally shaped variables generated by the incessant reiteration and recontextualizations of memetic resources in different Countryball locales and their dispersed audiences. It focuses on translocality is as an important parameter in the study of digital and often heteroglossic communicative practices in the era of superdiversity and increasing globalization (Vertovec 2007; cf. Bailey 2007; Collins et al. 2009; Leppänen 2012), for translocality highlights the mobility of both language users and semiotic resources, as well as their inequality (Blommaert 2010: 5). The following section outlines the notion of translocality in greater detail.

4.1 Translocality in Facebook meme pages

Endless permutations of Internet memes testify to the remarkable level of their semiotic productivity based on recognizability and grassroots, bottom-up dynamics spanning different and often distant social niches with different normative preferences and expectations. Recent theories of translocality (Leppänen et al. 2009; cf. Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Hepp 2009; see Kytölä 2016 for an overview) can be helpful in examining the processes negotiation of ludic normativity in such locales, as they stem from dialectical interplay of the local and the global.

Facebook meme pages highlight two important aspects of translocality: a sense of *connectedness* and *fluid understanding of culture* against the backdrop of increasing globalization (Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Hepp 2009). On one hand, translocality refers to various social and cultural spaces being connected by the media facilitating and promoting such connections through transport and mobility of discourses, in which the uniqueness and importance of the local emerges also in relation with other locales. On the other hand, it draws on exogenous or outward-looking sense of culture characterized by hybridity, translation and identification, which, in the context of the new media, translates into "a conception where both territoriality ('we here now in our place') and de-territoriality ('they there beyond the bounds of our locale') are reference points for communication, meaning-making, and identification" (Leppänen et al. 2009: 1081-2). Through social media practices such as posting and commenting on Countryball memes, participants situate their individual local (i.e. Czech) context transcribed into countryball cartoons in

the global discursive practices and patterns of the Countryball culture. In other words, Countryball pages provide communicative spaces where "participants are orienting not only to their local affiliations, but also to groups and cultures which are distant but with which they share interests, causes or projects" (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 5).

It follows that Facebook pages such as *Czechball* might be considered as a 'light community', that is, *focused but diverse occasioned coagulations of people* (Blommaert and Varis 2015: 54) that converge around a shared focus, be it a shared interest, object, game, project, another person, event, or, as in this case, Countryball meme-comics related to the current or historical social and cultural milieus of a given country or countries. I will return to the concept of light communities in Chapter 7 in the light of the analytical insights gained from preceding chapters. Now it suffices to note that light communities are prompted by each post in a given page, and thus they are bounded in time and space delimited by its comment section although the technological affordances of 'liking' and 'sharing' expand it further. This also implies a certain level of fragmentation since different people may congregate around each post, yet from a social perspective, this fragmentation is fractal because the impetus for congregation – posting Countryball memes – provides the communicative environment with socio-ideological coherence and normative orientation derived from the memetic format and its recognizable translocal features.

Unlike longer-lasting communities of practice and more ephemeral affinity spaces, light communities dedicated to Internet memes represent transient, shifting and interactively constructed collectivities based on conviviality (Varis and Blommaert 2015) rather than focused learning or sustaining regular participation and mutual engagement. Furthermore, norms are derived both internally (from the communal practice or space in question) and externally (from translocal and transcultural flows and their apprehension in memes which are subsequently featured as posts). As a result, 'thick' identity categories such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, status in the sense of Durkheim (Blommaert 2018c) are not the main organizing categories in light communities; nevertheless, light communities "might *complement* or, in some circumstances even *accentuate* and *intensify* the 'thick' community identities" (Blommaert and Varis 2015: 55, original emphasis). Although the name *Czechball* frames the page in many ways as *Czech*-based platform, namely in presenting *Czech* perspectives and views on geopolitical issues through the Countryball prism, the translocal character and appeal of the Countryball phenomenon draws in also non-Czech participants who consequently engage with the memetic content and/or attempt to establish interaction with other participants. As a result, such perspectives and views are often accommodated for international audiences. Consider for example the following comment discussing the new profile picture of the page featuring the Czechball character with a caption 'Czech is strong':

> Má to být jako "Čech je silný!", "Čeština je silná!" (s tim souhlasim) nebo "Český je silný!", též možno parafrázovat "Co je české, to je silné!" (také možno chapat ve dvojsmyslu)?
>
> It is as "Czech (person) is strong!", or as "Czech (language) is strong!" (I agree with that) or as "Czech (anything) is strong!" Which we can say like "What's Czech, that's Strong! (In english it doesn't rhyme)" (also might be understood as 'If you know, what I mean')?

Interestingly, the author of the comment includes an English translation of his evaluative explanation against the backdrop of a 'classic' tag line 'Polan stronk' (Poland is strong) in the Countryball universe (more on that in the following subsection), which has been recaptured here. The rhythmicity (here caused by nasal consonance in coda position) is taken as one of the evaluative criteria for an adequate Czech equivalent of the tag line, i.e. 'Co je česk**é**, to je siln**é**!' (my emphasis), which does not rhyme in English as the author notes ('What's Czech, that's Strong!'). In addition to discussing the semantic ambiguity of 'Czech', the author also ponders a possible interpretation of 'strong' as virile. This is achieved by deployment of another catch-phrase ('if you know what I mean') commonly used to point out double entendre in memetic content, usually in the form of sexual innuendo (Know Your Meme 2012: 'If You Know What I mean'). This introduces an intertextual ludic layer to the discussion of the tag line by associating Czechness with sexual vitality or prowess.

The translocal nature of Internet memes thus appears to have significant bearings on meaning-making processes as well as normative orientations and evaluations, which may concern communicative resources from more than one language, including the structural properties such as prosody or indexicality. Note, however, that not all normative orientations are aligned by virtue of translocality. The following section adopts three analytical concepts from sociolinguistics of globalization (sociolinguistic scales, orders of indexicality and polycentricity) in order to account for the layered and stratified systems of value of communicative resources in the light of their translocal facets. This will lay the groundwork for analytical lenses covering 'micro' details regarding metapragmatic reflexivity performed by participants upon negotiating normativity in comment sections and how it consequently reflects higher-level, 'macro' normativity pertaining to the 'light community' in question, including the connections with other Countryball locales and Countryball universe in general.

4.2 Inequality in Countryball discourses

Despite the fact that certain individual semiotic components making up Internet memes are translocal, they are not equally accessible to everyone. More specifically, it may be assumed that not everybody is equally familiar with the communicative resources native or 'enregistered' to the community and their historicity, i.e. the value attribution and meaning-ratification processes upon which specific forms of such resources receive specific functions and meanings in a given communicative environment. The differential access to forms and their contextualization (Blommaert 2005: 76) leads to differences and inequality in normative alignments among participants. While some alignments are preferred or expected, others may stand corrected, ignored or dismissed. This line of inquiry thus builds on a long tradition of addressing (socio)linguistic inequality in ethnographically-inspired language studies (e.g. Gumperz 1982; Gal 1989; Rampton 1995; see Blommaert and Maryns 2002; see Hymes 1996 for an overview).

Here I will be concerned with the differential sociolinguistic inequality manifest in metapragmatic reflexivity taking place in the comment sections about participants' conflicting as well as complementing views on *supposed* usage of the linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources in the comment sections. As participants explicate their views, it can be seen that

> participants also often orient to the "multi-scalar", "transpositional" implications of what's happening. After all, messages, texts, genres, styles and languages vary conspicuously in their potential for circulation – itself a major source of stratification – and sometimes this can itself become the focus of attention and dispute, as people differ in their normative sense of what should carry where. (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 10)

Sociolinguistic scales constitute a central notion in Blommaert's sociolinguistics of globalization (2010: 34) along with *orders of indexicality* and *polycentricity*: "sociolinguistic phenomena in a globalization context need to be understood as developing at several scale-levels, where different orders of indexicality dominate" (Blommaert 2010: 42). This results in "a polycentric 'context' where communicative behavior is simultaneously pushed and pulled in various directions" that we can think of as normative criteria or centers (ibid.). All three notions together offer a useful conceptual and analytical toolkit for the present purposes, as will be explained below.

Adhering to the later conceptualization of scale as 'spatiotemporal scope of understandability' (Blommaert et al. 2015; cf. Collins et al. 2009; Kell 2013), scale co-creates semiotic recognizability and validity of particular communicative resources in particular communicative spaces; in other words, "the *degrees* to which particular signs can be expected to be understandable" in a given time and space (Blommaert et al. 2015: 123, original emphasis). This becomes evident in situations where the resources constituting the peculiar idiosyncrasies of the Countryball phenomenon, which are to be expected or even preferred in (local) countryball pages (as their emblematic features), are discarded when reflexively measured against a different, higher scale-level; namely, for example, at the level of standard, codified or institutionalized patterns of language.

Moving back to the previous comment on 'Czech is strong', the motivation behind the evaluative explanation of the caption accompanying the profile picture can now be explained in greater detail. While the caption might invoke or index (point to) qualities such as lowbrow culture, and perhaps even ignorance or illiteracy since the referent of 'Czech', is not immediately clear without supplying additional grammatical devices such as a noun or an article. But grammatical correctitude is not enough. In order to understand 'Czech is strong' as an emblem of the Countryball universe, one needs to know the original and frequently reiterated tag line *Poland is strong* (more popular as *Polan stronk* and similar derivatives) and the spatiotemporal conditions in which it appears, i.e. when the Polandball character attempts to somewhat whimsically reassert itself upon facing denigration or bullying by more powerful countryballs such as Germanyball or Russiaball.

Scale in this sense organizes what Silverstein (2003) called 'indexical order' – a broader set of expectations in terms of the relationship between form, function and meaning that contributes to sociocultural coherence among groups and individuals within a particular

communicative environment. The focus on indexicality expands the analysis from solely denotational meanings to the sociocultural load of every utterance in question since indexical meanings unfold what "anchors language usage firmly into social and cultural patterns" (Blommaert 2005: 12). With respect to translocality and globalization, Blommaert (2005, 2010) extends the notion of 'indexical order' in an effort to take on board indexicalities that operate on higher plane of social structuring since some forms of semiosis are valued more or less than others. Inspired by Foucault's orders of discursivity (1984: 109), he distinguishes indexical orders from 'orders of indexicality' – patterns of indexicalities that indicate "systemic patterns of authority, of control and evaluation, and hence inclusion and exclusion" (Blommaert 2010: 38). Indexicality is thus an important component of metapragmatics since it refers to associations between forms and (typical) usage as well as stereotypes that are reiterated during communicative events while, at the same time, it reifies the connection between pragmatically usable systems of signs, and metapragmatic activities related to any layer of language and meaning-making.

To be more precise, indexicality explains the note in the given comment on rhyming qualities, which are present in the English caption 'Czech is strong' that stands as Czechball's take on *Pola**n** stro**n**k*. The deviance from standard orthography in *Polan stronk* indexes the whimsicality of Polandball character which constitutes its unique personality and hence cannot be derived into a direct equivalent *Cze**k** stron**k*** or the like, because Czechball's position and character is different in the Countryball universe (cf. both characters on Polandball Wiki). The Czech version offered in the comment ('Co je česk**é**, to je siln**é**') adheres to a similar rhyming pattern, but appears in standard orthography, which sets it apart from the asinine indexical traits bound to Polandball's character. At the same time, both the English caption 'Czech is strong' and the comment discussing it spell out the intricate delicacy of orders of indexicality in the making, that is, the emic (locally enacted) general sense and forms of *normalcy* in social interaction.

This points to the fact that there is never a single normative order in communication; participants may orient to or shift between multiple competing as well as complementary normative orders, hence the term *polycentricity*. Such orders can be seen as evaluative authorities or 'super-addressees' in Bakhtin's words (1986), against which our communicative conduct is measured (Blommaert 2010: 39). We have seen a participant discussing a caption accompanying a profile picture of Countryball Facebook page with a specific idea of how it *should be* seen vs. how it *could be* interpreted in the light of the different orders of indexicality. Therefore, it might be said that the participant orients to at least four normative centers at the same time: two of them are established and institutionalized (standard English and Czech), one semi-established ('Countryball register') and one emergent (local 'take' on Countryball register). There is also a clear hierarchy between the centers with decreasing scope of understandability; put simply, standard Czech and English are used for explanation and evaluation (valid at a higher, national and transnational scale or even global scale with English), followed by indirect connection to a specific and emblematic resource from the Countryball register (valid at a lower, translocal scale pertinent to Countryball locales), against which its emerging Czech counterpart is measured (valid at a local, situated scale pertinent only to the post and its comment section).

In the same way, other participants draw on and tailor communicative resources associated with other languages as well as genres, subgenres, styles and registers into a *heteroglossic* communicative input (Bakhtin 1981: 291; Leppänen et al. 2014; cf. Androutsopoulos 2011; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). Heteroglossia here refers to the mixed linguistic-semiotic forms and resources characteristic of Countryball discourses, as they are employed to construct the satirical/stereotypical portrayal of the nation-states via Countryball characters. In Bakhtin's original formulation, heteroglossia enables and fosters "the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth" (1981: 291). According to Leppänen and Häkkinen, heteroglossia provides participants with

> a means for indexing identifications which are not organized on the basis of local, ethnic, national or regional categories only, but which are increasingly translocal [...] not only to their local affiliations but also to groups and cultures which can be distant but with which they share interests, causes or projects. (2012: 18)

Crafting and engaging with such heteroglossic discourses bring together different orders of indexicality with different scopes of understandability and validity, which, by extension, projects orientations and alignments to different normative orders or criteria. Using this analytical toolkit may shed some light into what role translocality plays in these differences that make up the inequality in the mobility of resources, how it is navigated in digital communities, and how it contributes to inequality among participants from a sociolinguistic point of view. It will be demonstrated that inequality may be re-balanced or bridged in an inclusive collaboration (first excerpt) as well as in an excluding conflict (second excerpt), but first a word or two needs to be said about the collection and selection of the data.

This chapter draws on half-year long non-participant observation of *Czechball* between July 2017 and January 2018, during which attention was devoted to participants' comments to every post while field notes focused on the translocal and metapragmatic facets of particular communicative exchanges. The data were extracted through screenshots at the very end of the observation period when the activity in respective comment sections had ceased. Finally, two posts and 13 comments were selected for a fine-grained analysis on the basis of several reasons; first, practical reasons (the comics' size[12] was not excessive with regard to the spatial constraints of the present format); second, reflexive reasons (I focused only on samples that I could analyze with sufficient detail based on my tacit knowledge gained by systematic observation); and finally, methodological reasons (the selected data are representative of metapragmatic activities therein). Given the highly personalized nature of Facebook, all personal details are omitted for the reasons

[12] Countryball comics can stretch over several pages and require zooming tools in order to access all textual elements some of which might be distorted or backgrounded due to poor graphic quality of the memetic format. Therefore, comics that cannot be compressed into one MS Word page with sufficient legibility are excluded from discussion.

of privacy. Participants are identified by numbers and their comments are transcribed as faithfully as possible to the original.

4.3 Analysis

Emblematic of the Countryball phenomenon are its communicative practices – countryballs are often "interacting with each other mostly in poorly-written English, and exhibiting personalities derived from national and international opinions and stereotypes of them" (Polandball Wiki: "Polandball (meme)", n. pag.). The use of 'poorly written' or 'broken' English is strategic here. It involves styling – conscious deployment of various linguistic repertoires and their mixture depending on the individual countryball and author's access to Countryball universe. This may ultimately lead to communicative malfunctions and breakdowns as the practices of styling might not be recognizable to all participants in view of their indexical maintenance of ludic sociality in Countryball niches and discourses. The reason is that stylized utterances can often emphasize and hyperbolize realization of their targeted styles and genres in order to produce 'strategic inauthenticity' (Coupland 2001: 348-350), which invokes national and socio-cultural stereotypes and issues of identity and ideology related to the particular countryball and its geopolitical milieu. What is important here is that such styling presupposes the existence of a qualified audience capable of interpreting the linguistic, semiotic and discursive value of styled performance. The first excerpt provides an illustrative segue into such practices.

Excerpt 1. 'We can into banschluss'

The first excerpt features a shared post – a call for support and solidarity with the *POLANDBALL* page that had been suspended at the time. Since Countryball comics capitalize on disparaging humor, some content might be viewed or reported as violating the Community Standards of Facebook with the possibility of temporary suspension of the page and deletion of the flagged content. Frequent suspensions might result in permanent removal of the page, which happened to be the case with the *POLANDBALL* page in early 2017. *Polandball 2.0* had been subsequently established in the considerable effort to secure the continuance of the original page until it was reinstated two weeks later with *Polandball 2.0* becoming a back-up page (Procházka 2018b).

The translocal nature of the Countryball phenomenon is nicely illustrated in the original idiosyncratic caption ("we can into banschluss. Please can into telling your friends of us") and the *Czechball* caption ("Polan is of ban again 😟 ...show them some love") display a significant potential to galvanize the fans within and across different Countryball pages and niches into action. The captions themselves deserve a closer inspection as they draw on the Countryball register.

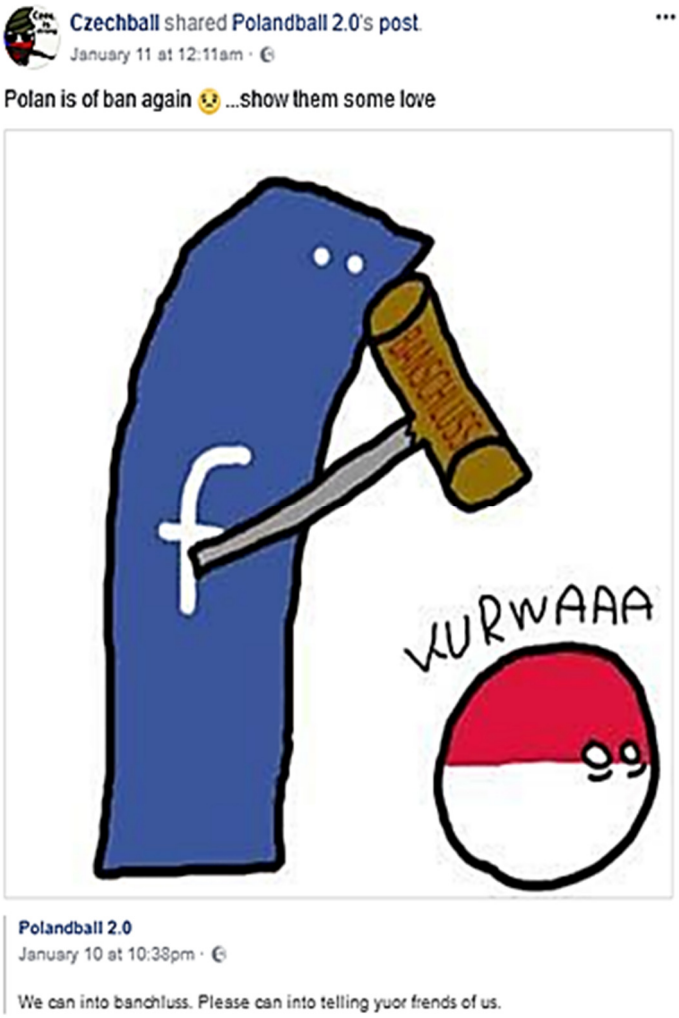


Figure 2. Excerpted from Czechball on 28 January 2018

Both contain relatively conventionalized orthographic and grammatical deviations from standard English in the Countryball universe (see Procházka 2016 for an overview), namely the use of –ing(s) ending in unsanctioned positions ("into telling"), letter switching ("your"), overpuntuation ("…show"), overusing the preposition *of* ("is of ban", "of us"), and an iconic of the Countryball syntactic pattern *X can(not) into Y* carrying a sense of ludic jocularity as part of linguistic stylization that was transposed from its origin in LOLcat memes marked by 'lolspeak' – a pidginized variety of English used to convey somewhat waggish images from the lives of cats (Blommaert and Varis 2015: 11). A word or two also needs to be said about the indexically-laden term "banschluss". The term is a portman-

teau of *ban* (i.e. Facebook's suspension mechanism) and the German word *Anschluss* denoting a political or economic union, but commonly referring to the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in 1938. Since then, Anschluss has become an established dictionary entry in many languages and a well-known term with complex and serious orders of indexicality in historical discourses. However, the term has been also enregistered into the Countryball register; it has been downscaled to a catchword signaling a ludic assertion of power and seizing control by force.

Here, Banschluss also extends the motifs of suppression and imposing authority onto Facebook in a graphical manner. Although the term Country*balls* suggests a roundish shape of the cartoon characters, some of them have acquired infamous gimmicks. This includes the rectangular shape of the Reichtangle character epitomizing the expansionist and imperialist past of former Germany that has been transposed onto the Facebook character. Its derivation – 'Faceblock' (here holding a hammer inscribed with the word "BANSCHLUSS") – has been created as an unofficial character to index the strictures of Facebook's Community Standards censoring certain Countryball content. The next point to notice in this respect are the inverted colors of the Polandball character (red-top and white-bottom to further underline its whimsical nature) and its vocally prolonged expletive in Polish "kurwaaa" (roughly 'fuuuck') – a trademark exclamation occurring whenever the Polandball character is stressed or facing sinister reactions from other countryballs.

Having explained the background of the first excerpt, it is clear that the idiosyncratic stylization goes beyond solely linguistic practices – to the semiotic and discursive levels – the ways in which the comics are drawn, framed and interpreted. The following exchange involves a discussion about the actual reason for the punitive measures taken by Facebook. Participants are marked sequentially (comments upon a comment are indented) and numerically in order to preserve anonymity and uniqueness of each participant. Parentheses () indicate my translation, square brackets [] contain my notes and braces {} signal tagging of other participants.

Participant 1: Why Polan so much into bannings..?
Participant 2: Turks 😀
Participant 3: They want to feel like powerfull kurwa.. after they fucked up WW2. (°ʖ°)
Participant 4: no no 😀 poland use cheat or hacks he therefore received a ban 😀
Participant 1: Used hacks for into space..? Oh kurwa
Participant 5: {Participant 3} At least we haven't been so fucked twice those times without vaseline by everybody 38/39 remember kurwa ? 😊
Participant 2: No it's not about that, Turks are pissed off cuz they lost some kind of Countryball competition to Poland 😀
Participant 1: Hahaha dumbass Türks

Participant 1 (P1) opens a conversation thread with an inquiry about the reasons for repeated bans (i.e. suspensions) of the page while drawing on the Countryball register, setting a ludic frame for his inquiry. As previously indicated, the mechanism for suspension on Facebook might be triggered by a sufficient number of reports from other users who perceive the published content as violating the Community Standards or otherwise

problematic. However, this would only be a trivial explanation. Looking at the comments, two lines of reasoning can be identified.

On one hand, P2 consistently argues that the page was reported out of spite by Turkish users who are stereotypically profiled as the enemies of Polandball and its allies. The *Turkeyball* page and its affiliates have a history contravening the ludic-convivial blueprints of the Countryball genre by using the comics to promote hostile nationalism and attacking communities congregating around other pages (Polandball Wiki: "Turkeyball"). It is important to remember that although Countryball comics have earned global popularity and garnered countless fans across every major social network, local Countryball platforms may be divided and exercise social media warfare against one another. Their fans engage in the so-called Countryball competitions by creating online polls in which they vote for the best countryball platform, as well as by exploiting the functionalities of the social networking sites hosting the platforms (e.g. reporting option on Facebook). Finally, P1 appears to be amused by P2's reasoning and contends "Hahaha dumbass Türks". Interestingly, he grafts Turkish diacritics marking vowel harmony onto English (T**ü**rks), by which he intensifies the sense of mockery and denigration similarly to the notorious mock-Spanish catchphrase 'Hasta la vista, baby' (Hill 1998).

The second line seeks an explanation by drawing on the shared contextual universe of Countryballs. P3 and P5 interpret the suspension against the historical background, whereby Polandball, burdened by the predicaments of the Second World War, now proudly strives to become a respected player in the international geopolitical arena, yet its efforts might be too assertive and intemperate, hence the suspension. P4 goes even further and claims that Polandball must have used tricks and forbidden practices, while P1 specifies this endeavor by invoking a well-known running gag in Countryball universe *Poland cannot into space* – a classic way for other countryball characters to poke fun at Polandball and its ambitious efforts undermined by the stereotype that many Poles living abroad are employed for menial jobs (hence Polandball is frequently portrayed with a toilet plunger).

All comments maintain a jocular, ludic character accentuated by laughing or smiling emoticons. Furthermore, the comments stand as a reaction to the call for support for the original Countryball page in two ways. One line of argument seeks to identify and disparage an out-group enemy (Turks), while the other strengthens the in-group cohesion by recoursing to classic inside jokes and catchphrases. This is accompanied by frequent phatic use of the word 'kurwa'. It is not used in its denotational sense ('a prostitute') nor as a purely expletive interjection ('fuck/shit/damn') denoting discomfort, but rather as a means of expressing union with the community, and thus different orders of indexicality can be seen at play here. Countryball platforms endow the word with exclusively social and bonding functions for establishing friendly atmosphere and interpersonal relations, whereas in standard usage (especially in formal, institutionalized settings), the word is generally considered a taboo with no significant value; on the contrary, its deployment in such environments may associate the speaker with lower social status or even disqualify him/her as untrustworthy, tasteless or repulsive due to indexical ties to discourses laden with obscenity and vulgarity. Interestingly, the whole comment section contains only one post in the Czech language, which, however, indicates another important point.

Participant 6: Už zase jo kurva?! 😢
(Once again yes kurva?! 😢)

'Sharing' the original status might be viewed in terms of recontextualization, whereupon the shared content is extracted from its original discourse and deployed into another while its form is largely preserved, but its reception and the way it is framed and understood depends on the local sociocultural milieu of the hosting platform. It is therefore no surprise that *Czechball* sharing *Polandball 2.0*'s content provoked a Czech phatic equivalent of 'kurwa' (i.e. 'kurva'). It should be also noted that there is no punctuation to clearly demarcate the line between the phatic and propositional content, as would be expected in standard usage (i.e. už zase jo**,** kurva?!). Countryballs are a heavily polycentric phenomenon – participants in local countryball pages may orient to different normativities at the same time. Participants thus do not draw solely on highly normative *standard* varieties of languages. Even in this small sample we may see an unfolding heteroglossic discourse drawing on a variety of resources from different languages as well as their registers and genres, including computing register of English ("hacks"), multiple taboo registers ("pissed off", "fucked up", "dumbass", "kurwa", "kurva"), vernacular English ("cuz"), mock-Turkish (Türks), emoticons and ASCII code made into a graphic-textual object (i.e. the so-called *Le Lenny Face* "(͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)" indicating sexual undertones).

The interaction above can be seen as a cooperation upon which every participant utilizes various semiotic resources that are not necessarily from the Countryball register, but given the fact they are all of lower scale-level and they are deployed with a goal to answer the question, they all fall within one order of indexicality. No conflict thus arises as participants orient to different, yet complementary normative centers. The following excerpt illustrates the opposite situation.

Excerpt 2. 'learn English before you start posting…'

Countryball pages do not always post content featuring countryballs, but their posts usually contain politically charged satire in one form or another. The post in the second excerpt includes a short video of what appears to be a late-night celebration of the relative success of a far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigration political party *Freedom and Direct Democracy* in the Czech 2017 parliamentary elections. Published in the immediate aftermath of the elections, on October 22, the video features its leader (Tomio Okamura) with prominent party members and supporters facing the camera while dancing to loud, fast tempo electronic dance music reminiscent of rave parties. The same video appears in a number of mutations on YouTube with different (mostly parodic) soundtracks and/or visual effects, so it is hard to ascertain the authenticity of the shared video, but that is not of concern here – its reception is.

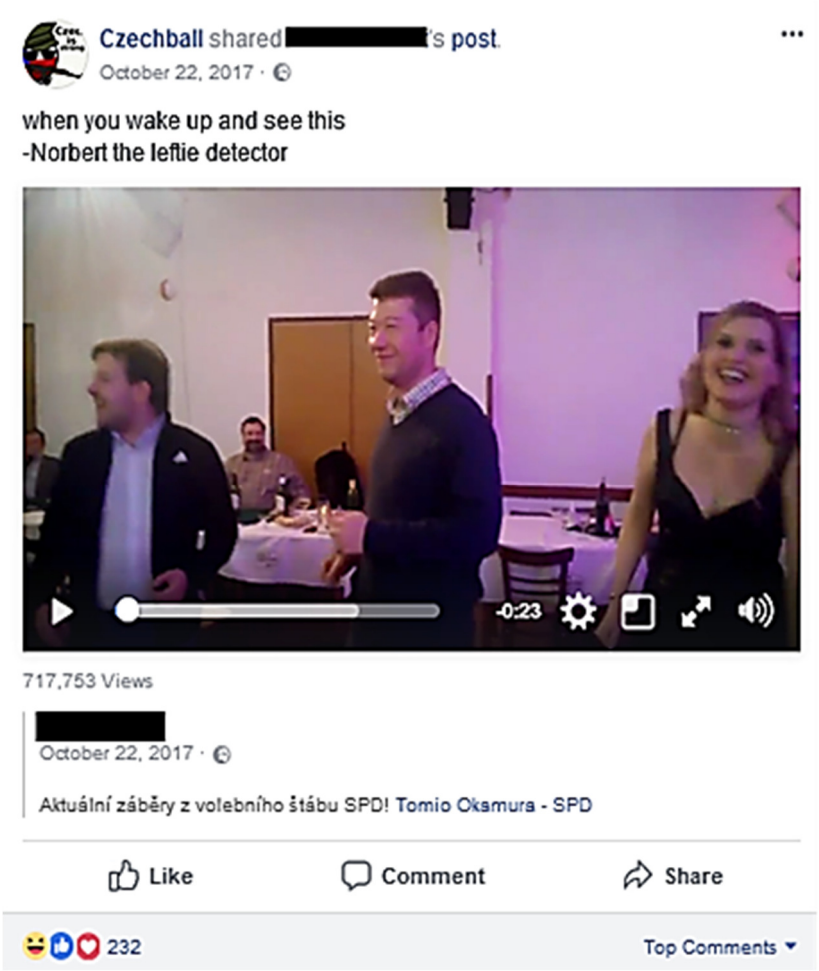


Figure 3. Excerpted from the Czechball page on January 27, 2018

The video is accompanied by the caption: "when you wake up and see this/-Norbert the leftie detector". Norbert is a nickname belonging to one of the administrators managing the page. His personal profile, as well as profiles of other administrators, can be found among other posts. Reflecting their political stances, *Czechball* admittedly profiles itself as a right-wing oriented platform accentuating predominantly topics of Czech national interest or relevance. It does so on a Countryball basis, which serves as a broadcasting medium capable of translating national or regional events and their interpretation to international audiences. Through the practices of recontextualization, the page can not only convey but also reinvent the quirks of political life beyond their domestic borders into the transnational network constituted by the Countryball phenomenon, and so the *local* becomes infused with the *global*. The reason is that Countryball register offers relatively stable patterns or batteries of resources for semiosis with purchase beyond the bounds

of the local or national. To maintain their durability and recognizability, they are, to a certain extent, ordered and therefore normative on the basis of their historical becoming. As Blommaert notes, "every act of language is an act that is grounded in historical connections between current statements and prior ones – connections that are related to the social order and are thus not random but ordered" (2010: 138). But the histories of becoming are not equally accessible to all participants; in fact, the difference may be quite significant. This will become clear in the following interaction between two Czech participants in the comment section below the post. Again, the translation included in parenthesis is mine.

Participant 7: POLANDBALL can into more funny - is of politically neutral. Czechball taken over by triggered lefties, help POLANDBALL, will help you in return invest in eastern polen!

Participant 8: {Participant 7}, learn English before you start posting...

Participant 7: Asi nevíš jak se píše schválně komolenou angličtinou na Polandballu... (You probably don't know how to write in the broken English of Polandball on purpose...)

So my question is: Are you pretending to be smart or you are just full of nonsense? Oh wait that's the same. Maybe next time try to ask and then lecture. Hope I never hear about you in the future.

In his first comment, P7 mobilizes several linguistic resources from the Countryball register in voicing his discomfort about too many "triggered lefties" being active on the right-leaning *Czechball* (as anticipated by Norbert's caption), while also admitting that the original page (*POLANDBALL*) displays a greater potential for humorous content since it is politically neutral. He suggests that, historically, the original Countryball content was impartial because every country/countryball ought to be subjected to satire more or less equally without systematically favoring any particular political perspective – something that the *POLANDBALL* page still maintains according to P7 (unlike *Czechball*). Additionally, there is one more linguistic-ideological aspect of P7's comment that deserves further attention. Besides the already noted linguistic features typical of Countryball, P7 mentions "polen" – a common way for Germanyball to address Polandball in the comics, often from the position of power and dominance both historical (martial) and contemporary (economic). This is an important lexical choice because it invokes and reiterates the stereotypical insignificance of Polandball's character in Countryball comics that is further underlined by his allusion to the infamous advertising campaign *Why didn't you invest in Eastern Poland?*. The campaign was organized by a Polish governmental agency promoting Poland as an attractive destination for both domestic and foreign investment with a particular focus on Eastern Poland as an economically struggling macroregion. It was, however, met with serious mockery (Lubin 2013) which inspired multiple (memetic) parodies on the Internet. The blunder had not gone unnoticed by the Countryball fans, and soon it became part of Countryball register.

P7's skillful deployment of Countryball resources nevertheless provokes another participant (P8) to question his communicative competence, proposing – somewhat paradoxically – that he should learn English before he uses it in a similar way again. Although P8's retort seems rather simple, it is a symptom of a larger problem in sociolinguistics of globalization. It indicates a degree of inequality leading to discrimination and exclusion that has been increasingly more documented in sociolinguistic literature on social media where the term 'Grammar Nazi' figures as a key word (more on that in Chapter 5).

It is reasonable to assume that P8 has, very likely, not been exposed to Countryball resources in use since they are not as frequently manifest in the comment sections of *Czechball* as in *POLANDBALL* (Procházka 2016). From the perspective of P8, P7 attempts to write in English but multiple orthographic and grammatical 'errors' undermine the value of his statement, making it in fact worthless (i.e. outside the scope of understandability). He views P7 as lacking resources for adequate participation in this particular communicative space, and suggests that he be excluded from it until he acquires them; in other words, until he aligns himself with the normative order embodied in prestigious, standardized English with global currency. On the other hand, the Countryball phenomenon represents a semi-established and flexible normative center with a different kind of currency, which is not recognized by P8, let alone acknowledged. Put otherwise, the conflict between two scale-levels (higher institutionalized English with global normative validity vs. lower semi-established register with here-and-now validity) becomes the focal point of both explicit and implicit metalinguistic, language-ideological critique of P7. Explicit because it is openly and mercilessly discarded, and implicit because the difference in accessibility to particular resources consequently creates imbalance of power between both participants. P7's response to P8 further upsets this imbalance.

Although the first part is in Czech and the second in English, together they form a coherent whole connected by a cohesive marker "so", yet both parts are meaningful on their own. The Czech opening serves as a face-saving move on the part of P7 for it justifies the 'errors' by accentuating the intent to 'commit' them. This intent stems from the fact that such 'errors' are in fact meaningful on a local scale-level (i.e. on a Countryball platform) in the sense that they are part of non-random set of precepts for semiotic conduct valid in that particular time and space. More specifically, he points to the fact that what counts as 'errors' is in fact ratified and recognized as a valid code for making oneself understood and/or display certain identity (e.g. being a Countryball fan) in that particular context. The use of Czech to convey this message is instrumental since it minimalizes the danger of misunderstanding, assuming that English is not a native language for the addressee (P8). In addition, it is clearly a personal message addressed at that one particular participant.

The other segment in English presumes that the audience is already initiated and knowledgeable of Countryball register/genre, so it serves not as a defensive, face-saving move, but rather as an offensive, face-threating one aimed to dispatch the opponent and end the interaction. It can also be said that P7 exploits a *pretextual gap* (Blommaert and Maryns 2002) – a gap between expected communicative competence in a given locality and what can be actually deployed by a given participant on the basis of his competence.

A significant divergence between expected and available competences might then become a strong factor in gatekeeping practices.

4.4 Concluding remarks

Seeing meme pages as local sociolinguistic systems with their own ludic historicity and patterns of normativity seems useful in making sense of the speed of change and high level of unpredictability encroaching social and cultural dynamics of today. By focusing on the ways in which communicative practices are collectively recognized and ratified by participants against the backdrop of ludic normativity, the study of translocality helps to trace the ways in which specific communicative resources acquire different values and meanings across different localities and how such differences contribute to the social effects of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, sociolinguistics of globalization offers an analytical apparatus for critical socio-historical scrutiny of their trajectories of usage instead of examining mere 'snapshots' of their history as they are deployed in a particular time and space. This allows for a more precise understanding of communicative dynamics and social cohesion of online (not only) memetic environments. For example, conventional approaches to code-switching can hardly give a detailed explanation of constructions such as 'eastern *polen*' or 'remember *kurwa*' since there is far more than *language* (in the traditional sense of *English*, *Polish*, or *German*) taking place. This bears important implications with regard to sociolinguistic inequality.

First, we are here reminded of 'second type of linguistic relativity' (Hymes 1996: 45) given the fact that as soon as particular communicative resources become part of a particular memetic genre and its semiotic register, their meaning and function might change depending on the local, situated uptake. This has invited critical incentives to revisit traditional sociolinguistic notions such as 'communicative competence' in the age of globalization and super-diversity because of the unequal capacity to realize intended functions by mobilizing linguistic and semiotic resources available to each participant (Goebel 2007; Blommaert and Backus 2013; Kataoka et al. 2013). I will return to the issues connected with the notion of communicative competence in Chapter 7.

Second, it follows participants enter interactional exchanges not only with their communicative repertoires and competences but also personal histories, perceptions and expectations that readily affect the configuration of the exchange before it even begins; hence we see participants exploiting 'pretextual gaps' to expel others from the communicative space. The ethnographic focus on metapragmatic reflexivity – on small 'micro' acts such as evaluative and/or explanative comments – can shed some light on how specific actions are *recognizable* and *recognized* by the participants themselves. This reveals the economies of indexicals at play which, in turn, point to larger 'macro' patterns of authority, access, power and the organization of social life of these new flexible collectivities appearing on social media.

Third, attention then needs to be paid also to the techno-social affordances and constraints on communicative action, particularly how the underlying technological infrastructures and user interfaces define the ways of deploying and engaging with specific

resources at specific places. Social media afford and promote seemingly 'empty' forms of phatic communication (Miller 2008; cf. Varis and Blommaert 2015), such as 'sharing' or 'liking' on Facebook, which, however, bear significant communicative ramifications in terms of translocality. Thus, for example, sharing a particular Countryball post may yield similar as well as completely different uptake in each Countryball page despite their shared orientation to the ludic-normative blueprints of the Countryball genre.

The following chapter delves into the original Countryball page *POLANDBALL*, which serves as international hub for countryball fans; and, as P7 indicates, for many Countryball fans it instantiates the 'proper' or 'ideal' normative orders for each countryball page. The chapter zooms in on a short period in early February 2017 when Facebook announced 'deletion' of the page due to repeated transgressions against its Community Standards, and the whole network of Countryball pages was mobilized to rebuild the *POLANDBALL* under a newly emerged page *Polandball 2.0*. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope will be introduced into the analytical framework in order to present a more detailed view on the socio-historical dimension pervading local negotiations within and across translocal Countryball pages whose fans engaged in the reconstitution of the *POLANDBALL* page.

CHAPTER 5

‘No hat for UK? 2/10’: Policing ludic normativity

Through their diffusion, iteration and uptake, Countryball memes become recognizable (and therefore normative) patterns of semiotic resources infused with ludic historicity accompanying their usage and lines of interpretation. As already noted, the precise shape and contours of the ludic normativity does not depend only on the light communities that congregate around them but also on the other social environments in which Internet memes are deployed. Negotiating ludic normativity, and by extension community formation, is an indefinite process resting on constant navigation of various expectations in communicative conduct shaped by translocal, intertextual and interdiscursive forces that cannot be viewed apart from their socio-historical dimension. Historical, because the expectations are bound to the histories of (ab)use of memetic resources, and social because they are inseparable from the social (and cultural) worlds into which memetic material is enregistered and recontextualized, and through which the trajectories unfold. Following this socio-historical lineage in Bakhtinian perspective via metapragmatically reflexive activities lends itself to identifying some of the criteria upon which a particular meme or social action becomes recognized or disputed as ludic in particular communicative situations.

This chapter thus concentrates on ludic normativity as a nexus of invoking different historicities relevant to the topics, events or tensions portrayed or suggested in the comics in connection with the indexical orders behind the ludic specificities of the individual Countryball characters (i.e. respective countries and their histories). Participants relate to the historical discourses conjured by the comics or by other participants. In doing so, participants monitor and police the use of Countryball resources against their genred, normative patterns (as we have seen the previous chapter), as well as the authenticity and legitimacy of the ludic performances against such historical discourses. Ludic normativity becomes significant part of ‘layered simultaneity’ – “meanings simultaneously produced, but not all of them consciously or similarly accessible to agency” (Blommaert 2005: 126). Untangling the ‘layered simultaneity’ sheds light on the socio-historical aspects of ludic normativity, that is, how participants choose to speak from a particular place and time in history that afford and constrain the production of meanings and performing particular identities; in other words, what can be said or done in relation to the spatiotemporal conditions invoked by the memes or the participants.

To this end, this chapter adopts Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope (literally ‘timespace’) as “invokable histories” (Blommaert 2005: 112; Blommaert 2015; cf. Agha 2007b), or more precisely as social, historical and political conditions framing interactions and discourses.

Seeing ludic normativity as *chronotopically organized* interactional achievement leads us to the criteria or orders on the basis of which participants police semiotic conduct in memetic discourses. I will be concerned with a specific type of policing which can be called 'memetic vigilantism' – metapragmatically marked interventions in the comment sections with a corrective or remedial purpose based on the perceptions of inadequate, incorrect or inauthentic composition of the memetic material and/or participants' relational work. Given the ethnographic standpoint anchored in the action-based approach to contextualization rather than pre-given or assumed contexts, the present chapter will be dealing with the following question: *how do participants police ludic normativity in relation to spatiotemporal configurations as they unfold in their interactions*? It will cover policing ludic normativity, i.e. acts of memetic vigilantism, in the first two weeks of the *Polandball 2.0* page. The page was established in the aftermath of Facebook's decision to suspend the *POLANDBALL* page indefinitely in early 2017, prompting more than 50 other Countryball pages to participate in its restoration[13] (Nash 2017) under the *Polandball 2.0* page.[14] Approaching memetic vigilantism as chronotopically conditioned social phenomenon serves to pinpoint the historical trajectories shaping the multiple layers of the original 'blueprints' of the ludic normativity within and across Countryball niches and discourses as they become synchronized in the *Polandball 2.0* page. Let us now proceed with distinguishing the term memetic vigilantism from other forms of grassroots prescriptivism and situating it within a larger framework of chronotopic approach to identity work.

5.1 Grassroots prescriptivism and memetic vigilantism

The affordances of Web 2.0 and participatory culture have opened up new avenues for studying and approaching grassroots prescriptivism (Lukač 2018) – normative ideals, recommendations and judgments on language use expressed by regular Internet users and general public rather than linguistic professionals and authoritative bodies speaking through language academies, style guides and dictionaries. Internet fora, blogs and social media now generate countless sites of metalinguistic debates on various normative criteria (e.g. aesthetic values, logicality, effectiveness, grammaticality etc.), often provoked by 'out-of-the-ordinary' linguistic expressions and performances (Danet 2001; Crystal 2006, 2011; Androutospoulos 2014). This brings us to the domain of language ideologies broadly characterized in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics as sets of beliefs and feelings that speakers have about language use and its conceptualization in connection

[13] Between 5 and 15 February, *Polandball 2.0* attracted more than 25,000 followers and published 113 posts with more than 4,000 comments (excluding replies to these comments), 7,339 shares, 89,533 unique reactions (e.g. 'like', 'wow', 'sad', etc.), 70 visitor posts, and 214 written reviews (personal opinions or views on the whole page that accompany given ratings ranging between one to five stars). The data was collected from the page between March and April 2017, after the activity in the *Polandball 2.0* page had ceased.

[14] After two weeks, the original *POLANDBALL* page was restored by Facebook and *Polandball 2.0* became a backup page in case of future suspensions.

with the social, cultural and political worlds they live in (Silverstein 1979; Irvine 1989; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994).

While the use of linguistic-communicative resources is largely non-standardized and non-codified in digital spaces, their inhabitants display tendencies towards self-correction or correcting others along the lines of various verbal-ideological beliefs, most notably those in line with 'standard language ideologies'[15] (e.g. Chapman 2012; Heyd 2014). Perhaps one of the most intrusive and (in)famous forms of grassroots policing in digital environments revolves around a common derogatory term 'Grammar Nazi' (GN) – a category of Internet users scolding others for what is perceived as non-standard language use. Originating in the English-speaking Internet discussions about the thus-thustly distinction in the 1990s, the category has grown into a recognizable identity performance – a meme in itself (Know Your Meme 2010b: "Grammar Nazi"). As a relatively unexplored sociolinguistic phenomenon, GN can be considered as a bottom-up participatory practice aimed at the appreciation and treasuring of language as a cultural asset on one hand, and a "kind of humor that exploits social inequalities or a tool of social differentiation" on the other (Harris and Hiltunen 2014; Sherman and Švelch 2015; Švelch and Sherman 2018: 2392). The fact that GN may index a wide array of discursive orientations or stances ranging from ludic and humorous performances to serious, discriminatory practices testifies to its complex and context-sensitive nature. Moreover, it calls into question the sociolinguistic preoccupation and imagination of 'the standard' in the contemporary globalized world (Appadurai 1996: 54; Agha 2007b; Pennycook 2007; Blommaert 2010; Paffey 2012), since 'the standard' seems to be "largely a product of perceptual reality and hardly as stable as it is often considered to be" (Coupland et al. 2016: 12-13; cf. Milroy and Milroy 2012). In addition, the question of 'correct', 'right' or 'good' language (or grammar) in digital communication has been further problematized by super-diversity (Vertovec 2007; Kytölä 2012; Stæhr 2016). Characterized by increased mobility, heterogeneity and complexity of contemporary communicative processes and practices, the term super-diversity relates to the conditions of global networked connectivity that blurs the lines between what has been generally associated with 'languages' as pre-existing, autonomous systems with clear boundaries (Arnaut et al. 2016; cf. Jacquemet 2005; Møller and Jørgensen 2008; Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Memetic vigilantism as a specific form of grassroots prescriptivism is indicative of these conditions and issues in a number of wider respects.

First, prescriptivism is closely connected with standardization in the sense that it perpetuates an aura of structural stability along with an appeal to uniformity (Milroy 1992: 3). Memes like Countryballs show that the linguistic resources and properties, even in their structural chunks (e.g. accent marking or a relatively fixed word order), can be creatively appropriated, broken down, reshaped and enregistered into memetic genres and registers to be subsequently mobilized in a number of localities where they acquire new (for example ludic) functions and meanings. While such processes may be reminiscent of standardization in the degree of policing they attract, the normative criteria and orders to which memetic vigilantes orient in particular memetic communities are necessarily

[15] Standard language ideology can be defined as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, non-varying spoken language that is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions" (Lippi-Green 2006: 293).

polycentric and dynamically changing. This includes not only the institutionalized, codified or standardized norms (from which they are often distinguished) but also those that are emergent and open-ended. What matters in terms of policing socio-communicative behavior in memetic communities is the discursive orientation or alignment with the socially ratified criteria derived from the socio-historical trajectories pervading and intersecting in the communal communicative space.

Second, prescriptivism generally revolves around grammatical or structural properties of a language or a code (predominantly orthography but pronunciation, collocability, lexical choices and morpho-syntactic features are frequently under scrutiny as well). Memetic vigilantism necessarily transcends the linguistic properties; it includes uses of semiotic-communicative resources operating on different spatiotemporal scales that are not always bound by the same authority or strictures. Rather than avoiding grammar errors, what counts as a 'good' meme is more relevant to the arrangement of communicative resources and the indexical orders they invoke or subscribe to. In this vein, concrete acts of memetic vigilantism may follow a perceived disarrangement of emblematic features native to memetic genres (e.g. using a circle tool to draw the Countryball characters) or misalignment of invoked indexical orders (e.g. being deemed inauthentic, untrue, inaccurate etc.).

Third, prescriptivism evokes ahistorical entrenchment or invariance of 'the standard' (Bex 1999; Milroy 2001) further cemented by an accompanying image of prestigious value and wide socio-economic currency (Blommaert 2010). This contributes to a sense of superiority associated with the standard (McColl Millar 2005) often perpetuated by those labelled as Grammar Nazis. Memes and memetic vigilantism indicate opposite tendencies. Memes frequently dislodge not only the standard but also standard expectations connected with ordinary forms of communication (think of LOLcats) in the communicative spaces they co-create, as well as beyond them. The creative deviations from the mundane or ordinary forms of communication reverberate through intertextual and interdiscursive echoes across time and space. Such forms may become meaningful even in non-memetic environments and discourses (e.g. in calling something or someone 'a meme'). As a result, metapragmatic enactments of memetic vigilantism usually account for the underlying acknowledgment of the inherent variability and flexibility in the criteria of quality (or 'correctness') in memetic stuff as it depends on relevant spatiotemporal conditions. The acts of memetic vigilantism thus do not always converge towards definitude, that is, providing final and clear-cut rectifications or recommendations to communicative conduct in view of the potential or perceived transgressions. In fact, engaging in memetic vigilantism may assume a ludic mode in itself; for example, when participants build on, compare or exaggerate their metapragmatic assumptions, whereby the goal is to have fun or to intensify preceding humorous elements in lieu of providing an answer to normative conundrums.

Having outlined the basic contours of memetic vigilantism, it can now be summarized as a prescriptive identity practice or a knowledge claim enacted to uphold normative criteria associated with memetic formats, genres and spaces. Let us now situate memetic vigilantism within a chronotopic framework in order to adjust the analytical lenses to the scaled, socio-historical aspects of such criteria in negotiating ludic normativity in the *Polandball 2.0* page.

5.2 Chronotopic approach to identity work in memetic communities

In memetic communities, each semiotic resource employed to create, modify, or comment on a particular meme lends itself to ratification by other members and signifies a potentially important choice with regard to community affiliation and performing particular identities (cf. 'culture of accountability' in Blommaert and Varis 2015). Indeed, in Bauman's seminal definition, identity is not a given category but "the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others" (2000: 1). Rather than finished or stable set of traits defining or categorizing human entities, identity constitutes a process that boils down to specific, situated and contextualized performances open to judgement against a number of various normative benchmarks or criteria that individual participants orient to or (dis)align with (Leppänen et al. 2017). More specifically, I will approach the acts of memetic vigilantism as identity practices prompted by a perceived failure to comply with normative parameters pertinent to specific spatiotemporal conditions or its imminent possibility. Seeing memetic vigilantism as a chronotopically organized phenomenon leads to deeper insights into "the complex identity work that goes on within communities and [...] relate it more specifically to times, spaces, and practices without resorting to simplistic dichotomies between macro and micro contexts" (Blommaert and De Fina 2017: 6).

Indeed, Bakhtinian notion of the 'chronotope' has been gaining currency in ethnographically oriented discourse studies (e.g. Leander 2001; Lemke 2005; Woolard 2013; Karimzad and Catedral 2018; Lyons and Tagg 2019; Kroon and Swanenberg 2019; De Fina and Perrino 2020). While originally referring to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 1981: 84), the notion has been also adopted as a potentially helpful instrument in developing a more holistic approach to identity work addressing challenges associated with globalization and super-diversity, especially those of the adequate conceptualization of context and contextualization (Blommaert 2005, 2015; Wang and Kroon 2016; cf. Hanks 2005; Collins et al. 2009). This is evident, for example, in the emergent critique leveled at the widely cited notion of 'context collapse' which is used for analyzing how users manage and self-evaluate their communication strategies in the networked digital environments, while facing the diversity and unpredictability of their audience, as these sites bring together "people from different contexts [who] become part of a singular group of message recipients" (Vitak 2012: 451; cf. e.g. boyd and Marwick 2011). Similarly to Tagg et al. (2017), Szabla and Blommaert (2018) take issue with assumptions about identity as something 'verifiable' or 'singular' belonging to particular groups or audiences – and thus constructing contexts around group membership, which, in the presence of an unintended online audience, generates a context collapse. Such a view is unsustainable considering the blended and increasingly complex networked nature of social media, and so the present work focuses on specific practices performed by participants in a range of specific situations. For example, enacting and taking part in memetic vigilantism on Facebook might also include performing rather specific actions such as 'asking', 'explaining', 'correcting',

or 'quarrelling', which in turn happen in the space of higher-level actions such as 'conversation' (here in terms of 'commenting' and/or 'commenting upon previous comments'). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that this space is part of a communal Countryball arena with its own history and normative expectations that participants navigate; furthermore, this communal arena answers to the strictures of Facebook Community Standards and its technological affordances as well as constraints.

To provide a more nuanced account of the policing practices, I shall draw on recent attempts to integrate the notion of chronotope into sociolinguistic theory and method as a conceptual tool in efforts to move away from understanding context as a 'sedentary' notion (the idea of context as a stable, static given) to dynamic, contingent and improvisational aspects of context(ualization) (Blommaert 2015; 2018c; Szabla and Blommaert 2018). The chronotopic understanding of context builds on earlier, multifiliar and action-based approaches to the study of language in society (Gumperz 1982; Cicourel 1992; Silverstein 1992; Goodwin 2002, 2007) that can be summarized as follows:

(i) A view of context as a *specific* set of features both affecting and producing *specific modes of social action*
(ii) in which such features have very clear and empirically demonstrable timespace characteristics – the actual timespace constellation is the determining feature for understanding the actual text-context patterns we observe;
(iii) in which some of these features can be carried over, so to speak, into different timespace constellations while others are non-exportable
(iv) and in which a precise understanding of timespace configurations is essential to account for a great deal of the sociocultural work performed in interaction (Blommaert 2018a: 2-3, original emphasis)

Chronotopes highlight an important facet of contextualization by which 'micro' acts of situated discourse reflect or invoke larger 'macro' spatiotemporal configurations, both real and imagined (e.g. both actual geopolitical issues and their ludic-satirical rendering via the Countryball universe), that categorize, co-organize and set the scene for interactional and interpretative work done by participants. The previous chapter has shown that the connection is indexical – every invocation involves locally enacted sets of meaningful signs (indexicals) that point to salient, context-specific sociocultural meaning reservoirs. Similarly to Gumperz's contextualization cues (1982), indexicals and their arrangements signal, affect and thus contribute to the (re-)production of ludic modes of social action in Countryball discourses. The recognizability of particular indexicals then allows for invocations of particular chronotopes.

In this layered and multi-scalar conceptualization of context, attention moves from one-dimensional (denotational/propositional) to multidimensional significance of signs. The focus on indexical meanings uncovers the connection between, for example, a particular Facebook discussion and larger societal and cultural discourse patterns: "[t]he interstices between distinct 'levels' of context disappear because each 'local' (micro) act of contextualization operates by means of locally ratified invocations of 'translocal' (macro)

meanings" (Blommaert 2015: 107; Agha 2007b). This position coincides with Cicourel's (1981) call for integration of the micro- and macro-sociologies:

> Neither micro nor macro structures are self-contained levels of analysis; they interact with each other at all times despite the convenience and sometimes the dubious luxury of only examining one or the other level of analysis (1981: 54). [...] The issue is not simply one of dismissing one level of analysis or another, but showing how they must be integrated if we are not to be convinced about one level to the exclusion of the other by conveniently ignoring competing frameworks for research and theory. (1981: 76)

Following Cicourel, the notion of chronotope offers a useful alternative to the limits of operating within the bounds of micro and macro categories that can hardly be precisely delimited with regard to the multiple and multilayered co-occurring frames in which comments on social media are interactionally set and read. In Goffman's (1974) terms, frames can be understood as interpretative patterns through which community members not only organize experiences but also identify and recognize social interactions in order to participate and maintain involvement in them. More specifically, invoking a certain chronotope through a comment on a Facebook post is set in the chronotopic frame of the post, which is nested in the chronotopic configuration of the Facebook page, community, group, or other discursive space hosting the post. Finally, all of this is embedded not only within the technological affordances of Facebook but also within its ideological space constituted by Community Standards – a higher-level chronotopic configuration. Each comment is then (non-)ratified against multiple, nested and intertwining chronotopic frames, as will be shown later in greater detail.

Moving back to the previous argument, the process of ratification operates on the basis of recognizability. Chronotopes carry and impose complex layered normative orientations on participants, which generates not only affordances and constraints on their communicative conduct but also specific diacritics of success and failure. Again, the previous chapter has demonstrated that the inability to recognize particular indexicals may lead to communicative malfunctions and breakdowns – if they are invoked in different or unusual configurations, they may be considered 'incomprehensible', 'out of place', and/or 'transgressive'. Blommaert and De Fina's note that

> specific timespace configurations enable, allow, and sanction specific modes of behavior as positive, desired, or compulsory (and disqualify deviations from that order in negative terms), and this happens through the deployment and appraisal of chronotopically relevant indexicals. (2017: 3)

These timespace configurations are invoked through appropriate indexicals that are recognized because of the coherent and generally shareable indexical value and function of signs (Agha 2007b). Facebook meme pages are a case in point. By publishing and circulating a certain type or genre of memes, indexical orders are built through their iteration and discursive orientations of those who engage with them, which turns into interactional and interpretative patterns allowing for maintenance of certain types of ludic sociality.

For example, Countryball pages on Facebook have developed constellations or sets of patterns transpiring in the ways they use the Countryball resources and the content they communicate via the comics. Every post (i.e. a comic strip in this case) then becomes a subject to evaluation and appraisal by its viewers while vigilante performances represent a specific type of response to the post (or any of its comments) that is perceived as transgressive or potentially transgressive *vis-à-vis* expected patterns of linguistic, semiotic or discursive resources. Deploying such resources in a way that violates particular indexical orders may not go unnoticed, as other (vigilant) members counteract such perceived transgressions by various measures, ranging from polite explanations to outright derision. These counter-acts may become subject to further additions, revisions, validations or rectifications by other participants, which then results in metapragmatic chains of amending.

Such chains are indicative of different recognitions occurring simultaneously at different scale levels, when different members recognize different indexical orders in the same discourse (Blommaert 2015: 113). The multi-scalar nature of recognizability urges us to account for the wide range of heteroglossic indexicals consisting of mixed linguistic and semiotic resources employed to invoke ludic figures of nationhood in the form of Countryball characters and their satirical narratives. Countryball meme pages on Facebook are case in point. They attract and incentivize interactional work involving indexing multiple points of view and positioning towards larger social, historical and ideological processes under the ludic frame accompanying the rendering of the political realities in Countryball comics. It follows that engaging with the ludic-satirical stimuli provided by the comics marks processes of (dis)alignments and (dis)identifications with the chronotopic representations of individual nation-states in the comics, which, like the semiotic makeup of such representations, are policed as well.

In what follows, I will outline some of the heteroglossic features of the Countryball register on a public announcement informing about the *POLANDBALL* suspension and related circumstances. This will provide a background to the following analysis of two excerpts from the *Polandball 2.0* page discussing concrete acts of performing memetic vigilantism in the comment sections with different effects. In the first case, vigilantes are provoked by preceding violations of established normative orders that are associated with various layers of particular chronotopic conditions associated with the European migrant crisis. The second performance is enacted as a joint negotiation upon a relatively new situation when a normative order yet emerges upon alleged deletion of the *POLANDBALL* page. Although Facebook's measures taken against meme pages constitute an act of vigilance as well, it is not viewed as a case of memetic vigilantism because it operates on different normative mechanisms that will be discussed in Chapter 7.

5.3 Analysis

Before delving into the analysis proper, keep in mind that Countryball comics capitalize on the principles of disparaging humor which "denigrates, belittles, or maligns" (Ford and Fergusson 2004: 79) in the form of reifying national and cultural stereotypes by framing them in current as well as historical diplomatic relations and events transcending local

importance. Put differently, bits and pieces of particular realities, both real and fictional, are transcribed or transposed into the satirical form of Countryball comics, but this satirical transformation is, nevertheless, constrained by certain linguistic-semiotic and discursive conventions or patterns. These transformative constraints can be explained in terms of Goffman's 'keying' – i.e. "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (1974: 43-4; cf. Cowper 2003). Here, keying also coincides with the heteroglossic communicative style marked by weaving linguistic-communicative resources associated with multiple languages (Bakhtin 1981; Leppänen 2012; cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 13). As already mentioned, heteroglossia enables participants to perform a ludic disassociation from the constraints of political correctness or 'standardness' by invoking or portraying stereotypical identities associated with particular nation-states.

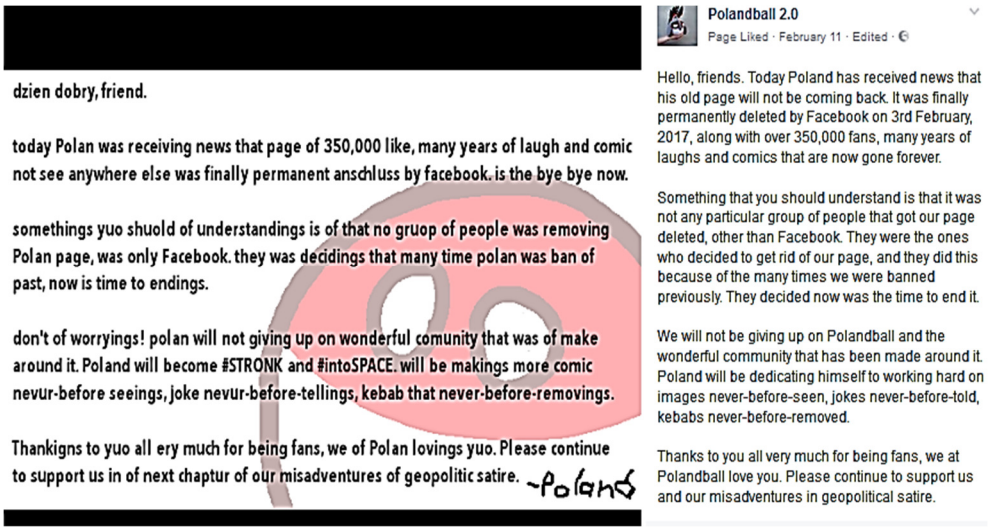


Figure 4. Facebook status announcing the permanent removal of the POLANDBALL page (the equivalent in Standard English can be found in the description, presumably by the same author). Posted on Polandball 2.0, February 11, 2017; excerpted on March 11, 2017

Note that here the keyed performance – stylization – incorporates resources from other languages, such as the Polish greeting "dzien dobry" (good day) and the indexically-rich German term "Anschluss" discussed in the previous chapter, apart from recurrent deviations from standard orthography (e.g. missing sentence case, vowel switching such as in "you" or "should", frequent deletion of final consonant *d* in "polan" together with inconsistent capitalization such as "polan" vs "Polan", etc.) and grammar (e.g. *-ing(s)* suffix in non-sanctioned positions often preceded by the preposition *of* – "of worryings" or 'of understandings', missing plural marker – "comic" or "laugh", subject omission – "was only Facebook" or "is the bye bye now", significant reductions in verbal categories such as

absence of the perfective aspect while the past is signaled only by *was* – "they was decidings" or "was of make around it", etc.). Moreover, seeing the Polandball character in the background with inverted colors (red-top, white-bottom) suggests that the deviations also reach beyond purely linguistic practices – to the semiotic and discursive levels, or the way in which the comics are drawn, represented, and interpreted. I will return to this particular announcement and participants' responses to it in Chapter 7. Note, however, that the heteroglossic layers laminating Countryball register offer sets of recognizable resources for meaning-making and identity work, as well as for invoking chronotopic conditions or frames affording the normative (indexical) orders or criteria for ratifying such practices. Specific examples follow below.

Excerpt 3. "Who the fuck wrote this believing it was British opinion"

The third excerpt was published on February 13 after being translated into English from the original Portuguese comic strip created by an affiliated Facebook Countryball page, *BrasilBall* (only the onomatopoeic expression of slurping "*gole" has not been translated). It depicts a multi-layered satirical take on the United Nations in the light of the critique leveled at its failure to mediate the latest Middle East conflict in Syria and Iraq that eventually led to the European refugee crisis.

Nevertheless, it is not a typical Countryball comic strip since it is resemiotized[16] in the form of a different Internet meme known as *Boardroom suggestion* – another satirical comic series that pokes fun at the perception gap between what consumers want and what corporate executives think they want.[17] The strip is modified such that the humans are replaced with Countryballs and the ending diverges from the expected pattern of the original meme.

The satire revolves around the fact that the suggestion made by USAball is warmly accepted even though it blatantly violates the charter of the United Nations. Besides USAball, the strip also features other permanent members of the UN Security Council – Russia and the UK – plus Brazil, a frequent temporary member. In order to deal with the pressing repercussions of the Middle East crisis, UKball suggests accepting "all their people" (i.e. refugees and asylum seekers) to Europe – possibly a satirical take on Germany's previously welcoming immigration policy, which is, however, in stark contrast to UK's response to the crisis. UKball's response thus appears to invoke what is perceived as a transgression against expectations derived from the indexical order.

[16] Memes often combine text and images into multimodal ensembles which are typically subject to resemiotization when they spread; the original signs are altered and maintain only a recognizable "substrate" which is, however, situationally adjusted in a new context to produce different communicative effects (Leppänen et al. 2014; Varis and Blommaert 2015: 36; cf. Iedema 2003; Scollon and Scollon 2004).

[17] "Each comic begins with the executive consulting his staff for new product ideas, followed by the first two employees giving corporate-safe answers, which ends abruptly with the third employee being thrown out of the window for suggesting a consumer-approved idea." (Know Your Meme 2013b: "Boardroom Suggestion", n. pag.).

Figure 5. Posted on Polandball 2.0, February 13, 2017; excerpted on March 13, 2017

The attempt is consequently invalidated in the comment section by the vigilantes. Once again, participants in the comment section are numbered successively, continuing from the previous chapter. Second-tier comments (comments on other comments) are numerically and further indented. Emoticons, smileys and emojis are indicated in parentheses.

Participant 1: That needs to be Germoney, we're not allowing them in

Participant 1 performs the vigilante identity by means of identifying himself as British through using the exclusive *we*, meaning that from their (i.e. British perspective) UKball's suggestion is divorced from reality. The identification is strategic – it implies that he is 'in the know' and provides him with credentials to speak on the matter (of this chronotopic condition) as an authority; further, he attempts to rectify the invocation by attributing the suggestion to 'Germoney', using the auxiliary verb *need* to signal a requirement for fixing the transgression.

The trope 'Germoney' deserves a closer inspection for it aptly illustrates the way in which indexical meanings connect "discourses to contexts and induce categories, similarities and differences within frames, and thus suggest identities, tones, styles and genres that appear to belong or to deviate from expected types" (Blommaert 2007: 115; cf. Silverstein 2003; Agha 2005, 2007). Given the position and influence of Germany in the European Union, the term 'Germoney' has acquired a recognizable historical value which may potentially signify a number of ideologically related stereotypical connotations, including not only the typical efficiency-oriented, yet humorless and workaholic breadwinning father-figure of the European Union but also that of Germany actually being the 'Fourth Reich' which succeeds in conquering Europe through trade and financial discipline only to exploit its economic muscle to dictate key policies (cf. Heffer 2016). These meanings are of course in constant dialectic development; for example, until the European migrant crisis, the key policies dictated by Germany had been limited largely to the fiscal sphere. Hence the trope 'Germoney' alone suffices to raise an objection against what he perceives as a misplaced chronotope. The following comments are slightly more detailed in this perspective.

Participant 2: "Bring all their people to Europe"
Who the fuck wrote this believing it was British opinion?
Participant 3: mayor of Londonistan city (laughing emoticon)

On the other hand, P2 disparages the invocation as he juxtaposes the suggestion with an emotion-laden question about its origin ("Who the fuck wrote this believing it was British opinion?"). Interestingly enough, his question is answered by Participant 3, who shares the same footing as P2, yet he does not perceive the invoked chronotope as entirely misplaced since he attempts to restore the ludic sociality by jokingly attributing the agency to a "mayor of Londonistan city". In addition, P3 invokes another chronotope by attaching the Persian suffix -(i)stan (signifying *land* or *country*) to 'London', which results in the derogatory sobriquet *Londonistan* – an indexical conveying negative connotations related to the growing Muslim population in the city as well as the pro-immigration mayor Sadiq Khan, which partially negates the transgression because if UKball represented only London, its suggestion in the comic might not have been transgressive.

Participant 4: No hat for UK? 2/10
Participant 5: Indoors
Participant 6: and monocle

Finally, other comments performing the vigilante identity (P4 and P6) point to non-linguistic transgressions against the Countryball conventions, namely that UKball does not wear a monocle and hat.[18]. The reason is that the portrayal of UKball does not comply with the semiotic conventions, hence the evaluative rating "2/10". Even with the objection

[18] The monocle and hat are essential semiotic emblems denoting 'poshness' and conceit that color UKball's character in the light of its imperial past.

justifying the missing hat (P5), the discrepancies indicate that the author(s) of the original comic (presumably from the *BrasilBall* community) did not have the same kind of access to the contextual universe of Countryballs as the members of *Polandball 2.0*, which offers enough of a stimulus for memetic vigilantes.

Participant 7: We in Brazil want to explode them, Mohamed cannot into HUEHUE

As for Brasilball, its suggestion utilizes the heteroglossic resources of Countryball register, namely by adding the -ing(s) suffix to grammatically non-sanctioned positions, as well as the Brasilball-specific transcription of laughter "HUEHUE". P7 does the same in his performance voicing discomfort with the portrayal of the country's attitude specifically towards Muslims. This is achieved by the indexical synecdoche "Mohamed", referring to the Islamic prophet but with a scope of meaning that most likely extends to all his followers – that is, the antecedent of the pronoun *them* in "we in brasil want to explode them". Further, "Mohamed cannot into HUEHUE" represents a creative multi-dimensional invocation: (i) "Mohamed" pertaining to chronotopic configurations related to the Islamic religion, (ii) the ludic catch-phrase *X cannot into Y* (originally used in LOLcat memes and later incorporated into Countryball comics as the iconic *Polandball cannot into space*),[19] which also appears in situation-dependent variations such as the one currently discussed; and finally, (iii) "HUEHUE", indexing Brazilian identity apart from just conveying laughter by virtue of the specific onomatopoeic spelling that has been enregistered in online environments and is now associated with Brazilian Portuguese. Such a delicate play of chronotopes allows P7 to perform the vigilante identity in a very concise yet relatively complex way; he identifies as Brazilian via stressing the exclusive *we* ("We in brazil"), which, as in the case of P1, signals a change in footing – he disaligns himself from a tolerant approach to Muslims. Furthermore, by invoking multiple chronotopes and deploying them in a conflicting position through heteroglossic stylization, he in fact aligns himself with an opposite point of view.

The first excerpt is an example of a transgression in keying the reality into a satire, which is immediately pointed out in the comments. This is also a clear testament to the 'post-panopticon' sociality of social media (Leppänen et al. 2014: 114; Leppänen and Piirainen-Marsh 2009; Arnaut 2012), manifested in a lack of centralized mechanisms of control by the authorities in power (i.e. the owner/administrator of the page). Instead, the dominant form of policing remains in grassroots, peer surveillance, in which the ludic sociality and normative structures (including identity) are jointly negotiated and enforced by the participants themselves. What is important is that this negotiation is part of a complex, non-linear social encounters and interactions consisting of diverse (sometimes even off-topic) actions. The thematic domain introduced by the main action – the post – establishes the normative frame that is further challenged, negotiated and developed in

[19] A trademark catch-phrase associated with the Polandball character. Generally, it is one of the common ways to make fun of Poland and its relative economic and technological underdevelopment compared to Western countries. The phrasal core *X cannot into Y* also carries a sense of whimsicality that is chronotopically transposed from its origin in LOLcat memes marked by "lolspeak" – a pidginized variety of English used to convey whimsical images from the lives of cats (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 38)

several directions reflecting different chronotopic configurations. The following excerpt focuses more on the process of joint construction and conviviality in performing of memetic vigilantism.

Excerpt 4. "banschluss"

The fourth excerpt exemplifies the 'nesting' of chronotopic frames and the dialectical nature of peer normativity. It was published in the wake of the creation of the back-up page *Polandball 2.0* as a comic portrayal of Facebook's censorship practices, using the graphic format of the Countryball comics. Interestingly, the third excerpt also portrays a clash between several chronotopic configurations in multiple layers. On a higher scale, there is a conflict between Facebook Community Standards (globally regulating the acceptability of the published content) and Countryball pages (locally enacting and framing the satire), which also turns into a conflict on a lower scale among Countryball fans over the graphic nuances in the representation of Facebook in the comics.

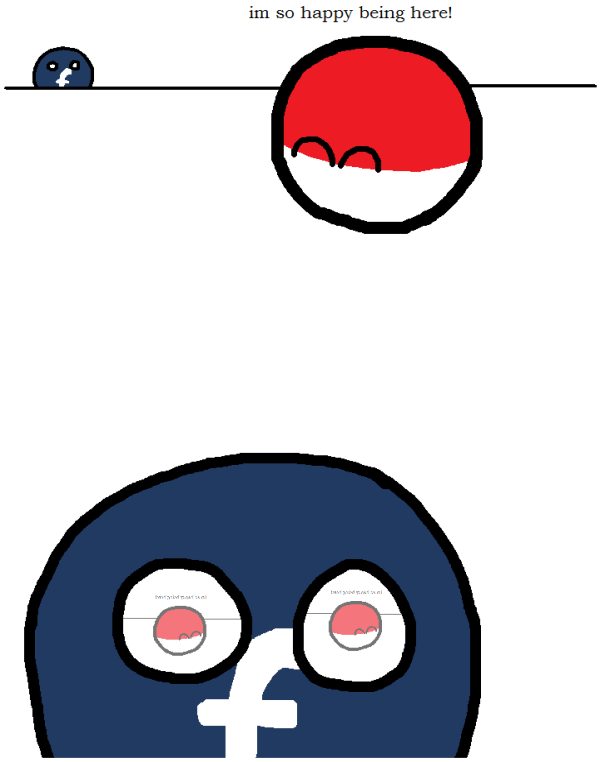


Figure 6. Posted on Polandball 2.0, February 6, 2017; excerpted on March 13, 2017

Both internal and external perspectives are interlinked, and they cannot be viewed separately. The reason for this is encapsulated in the single term "banschluss" – a portmanteau of 'ban' and 'Anschluss' coined to assimilate the historical pre-WWII reality into the Countryball universe situated in Facebook so as to draw negative parallels between the seizure of control by force and modern Facebook's censorship. The comic features also semiotic indexicals of 'banschluss' in the form of the so-called 'banschluss eyes' possessed by the Facebook character, signaling imminent threat to another Countryball character, namely Polandball. The comment section of this particular comic shows concrete acts of memetic vigilantism amidst the negotiation of normative expectations even beyond the chronotopic bounds of Facebook.

Participant 8: Is this the first appearance of a Facebookball? Gives me shivers!

Participant 9: [Icelandball]: Hmm i think we have comics with it - éma

Participant 10: Nah but usually Facebook is represented using the rectangle, like for the German empire- since you know. Banschluss.

Participant 11: On Reddit, the German Empire is just a ball, not to be confused with the Reichtangle.

Here, the German Empire can be both the ball and the rectangle.
As for Facebook, its representation is unofficial, but usually known as Faceblock. When not in banschluss mode, it is in the form of a square or a cube (like Michigan or Israel). In banschluss mode, it is in the form of a rectangle, echoing the Reichtangle.

Participant 8: Wow (flushed face emoji) gonna take note of this

The interaction is initiated by P8, who wonders about pre-existence of the Facebook character in the comics, prompting three vigilantes into action. However, unlike in the previous excerpt, the enactment of memetic vigilantism is not prompted by a perceived transgression; instead, the exchange takes form of metapragmatic comments together reminiscent of a joint lecture.

First, P9 (another Countryball page represented by its owner signed as *éma*) states the assumption that the Facebook character has previously been featured in the comics, but does not specify its conventional characteristics. The assumption is validated by P10, who goes on to spell out its conventional shape (a rectangle) while referring to the what he views as communally shared indexical knowledge of the 'German empire' by the invocation 'Banschluss'. Similarly to 'Germoney', the portmanteau 'Banschluss' is rife with indexical meanings in the contextual universe of Countryball. The first part of the term ('ban') refers to a common practice executed by Facebook upon receiving a sufficient number of reports, whereby the page becomes suspended and flagged content is removed. The second part of the term ('Anschluss') historically refers to the annexation of Austria shortly prior to the outbreak of WWII; however, in the Countryball universe, it is a "running gag [...] used to describe a countryball becoming a rectangle with small eyes (the 'Anschluss

eyes') before proceeding to invade and/or annex another countryball. [...] The most common example of this is Germanyball becoming Reichtangle" (Polandball Wiki: "Anschluss", n. pag.). Together with 'Faceblock' (i.e. a reference to Facebook's character portrayed in the comics), the portmanteau 'Banschluss' invokes the original chronotopical frame transposed to the new reality defined by Facebook's restrictive policies, a different, higher-level chronotopic configuration, which largely prohibits the disparaging satire employed by the Countryball comics and resulted in the suspension of the original Facebook page. 'Banschluss' here also serves as a trope that should help P10 to 'join the dots' and facilitate his access into the Countryball register and alignment with its trajectories of use. Finally, P11 introduces yet another chronotopic layer by a reference outside the bounds of Facebook, to another participatory cultural platform – Reddit.

As previously mentioned, Reddit differs considerably from Facebook in its technological infrastructure as well as in its normative criteria and expectations regarding Countryball comics. In fact, P11 stresses that the rules for depicting particular Countryball characters are more clearly set on Reddit than Facebook (cf. Reddit 2014: Official Polandball Tutorial). In his rather lengthy reaction to the previous comments in the thread, he outlines the normative expectations regarding the portrayal of the 'German empire' and the indexical implications that come with the change of shape in "banschluss mode [...] echoing Reichtangle" – an antagonistic Countryball character embodying Imperial Germany whose qualities are transposed to the Facebook character. His communicative input makes a seamless use of Countryball register (e.g. 'Reichtangle', 'Faceblock', 'banschluss mode'). In addition, he employs several linguistic and discursive devices to establish his credibility as a person with a considerable degree of access to Countryball universe and familiarity with its customs and conventions on other platforms, namely advice ("not to be confused with the Reichtangle"), possible alternatives (e.g. "can be both the ball and the rectangle"), parallels ("like Michigan or Israel") and deictic contextualization cues ("on Reddit", "here" and "as for Facebook").

Interestingly, he suggests that participants on both platforms draw on Countryball register while sharing ideological coherence based on indexical orders shaped by reiterating the sociocultural patterns. But each process of reiteration is subjected to different chronotopic and techno-social conditions that put forward normative benchmarks for each communicative action related to a particular reiteration ratifiable by other members (Szabla and Blommaert 2018). This also sheds some light on the layered and non-unified nature of indexical orders developing at different speeds and directions with different scope and scale on various platforms. At some points the orders may seem even mutually exclusive in comparison, as shown by P11 weighing in as an authority, deeming it necessary to point out the normative differences between Facebook and Reddit. Furthermore, his performance testifies to the polycentricity of digital environments; the fact that participants can orient to, or feel accountable towards, several competing and/or complementary normative criteria for communicative practices or patterns open to scrutiny and evaluation.

Finally, all of the answering participants presuppose that P8 is a fan of Countryball comics, is attuned to the ludic-satirical frame provided by the comics and has some (albeit limited) access to Countryball register. Each participant subsequently attempts to 'lift the

momentary instance of interaction' (the event) and 'point towards' normative expectations ('phenomena of a higher scale-level') via vigilante practices. While P9 hesitantly acknowledges the existence of normative expectations in this respect, P10 specifies these expectations, and further, he uses the term 'Banschluss' in order to frame the communicative situation in a perhaps more comprehensible chronotopic condition. P11 specifies the previous comment by P10, whose interpretation of these expectations by expanding the topic beyond Facebook. P11 highlights the translocal and interdiscursive conditions surrounding the Countryball phenomenon. The interaction finally ends with P8 exclaiming "wow", accompanied by a smiley signaling a flushed face followed by mentioning that he is "gonna take note of this", hence acknowledging the vigilante acts performed by the other participants. The fact that P8 acknowledges the explanatory responses shows that the vigilante identity is – in this case – both actively performed and contractually achieved on ludic-convivial grounds.

5.4 Concluding remarks

Seeing identity work on social media as organized, regimented, and ordered by specific spatiotemporal configurations can provide a basis for understanding complex social and cultural processes in polycentric online environments, such as a Facebook meme page. Internet memes undergo countless recontextualizations throughout their digital trajectories as part of their reiterative spread, but every permutation is based on recognizability, and therefore normativity. Memetic communities adopt and constantly (re)negotiate various aspects of particular normativities derived from recognizability of relevant indexical orders with respect to specific chronotopic conditions. Focusing on comment sections featuring performance of memetic vigilantism – on perceived or potential non-adherence to these normativities – yields several insights into the traditional notions of 'agency' and 'structure' with regard to the dynamics of online community formation.

First, participants enter interactional exchanges with personal histories, perceptions and sociocultural loads that readily affect the configuration of the exchange before it even begins. Vigilantes might be thus prompted by differential inequality (Blommaert 2005: 76) since participants differ in their ability to recognize communicative resources enregistered to the community, and consequently also in the ability to interpret meanings due to differential familiarity with form-function-meaning mapping processes in specific chronotopic configurations. Different participants also concurrently recognize different indexical orders at different scale levels, while some might not be recognized at all due to insufficient access to relevant discourses and their histories.

Second, the individual acts of commenting on a post may reveal specific (mis)recognitions and their subsequent (non-)ratifications in terms of memetic vigilantism. They inform about the unfolding coexistence and interplay of multiple chronotopes in the interaction, including their nested nature and hierarchy in the constantly shifting online-offline nexus. By tracking the individual vigilante performances, it is possible to get a glimpse of the economy of indexicals governing invocations of particular chronotopic conditions

and their ratification points not only to established normative orders but also to emergent, ad-hoc norms defining (ludic) modes of interaction at hand. Thus, vigilante performances testify also to the sociocultural change – something heralded by Internet memes themselves.

Third, mobilizing linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources, especially those indexically rich, is ratified through a perpetual process of negotiation based on grassroots character that is telling of the unpredictable, yet at a deeper level understandable, organically developing kinds of normativity in the loose collectives such as meme pages, where norms originate not from institutionally-backed authorities, but rather at the levels of mundane, peer-to-peer interaction that operates as an arena of policing.

Finally, the chronotopic approach to memetic vigilantism and identity work in general reveals a high level of fragmentation; identity work processes incorporate diverse resources and normative templates that need to be deployed in specific spatiotemporal configurations. And in each of these fragmented configurations, every communicative action drawing on such resources and templates can be policed. Imagining Facebook meme pages as a communicatively organized and dialectically ratified set of social relations with respect to particular spatiotemporal configurations offers a nuanced account of ludic normativity and identity work that attempts to avoid *a priori* and often misleading or inaccurate assumptions about its contingent social (con)structures in the online-offline nexus (Blommaert 2018c: 81-83; Varis and Blommaert 2015). The next chapter expands the chronotopic framework in order to address the contingency of ludic normativity in Countryball discourses upon its breakdown, that is, when certain participants individuate from other Countryball followers by intentionally breaking the ludic frame accompanying Countryball memes in the light of the European migrant crisis.

CHAPTER 6

‘Fake heroes and overreacting biggots’: Breaking ludic normativity

The previous chapter has shown that the chronotopic framework allows for a deeper understanding of how diverse audiences navigate different socio-historical trajectories of Countryball resources in their perceptions and policing of the ludic representation of nationhood. In this chapter, I will focus on Countryball comics in their capacity to invoke ludic representations of personhood, especially in the ways they prompt affective responses. Both *Czechball* and *POLANDBALL* pages have been prolific in their respective rendering of the heated political debates surrounding the migrant relocation schema or the quota system in the aftermath of the European migrant crisis. Their ludic-satirical representations of the crisis and migrants have enticed certain participants to challenge ludic normativity. Apart from the linguistic-semiotic orders or patterns, the chronotopic framework lends itself to pinpointing and examining the moral-epistemic criteria in negotiating ludic normativity that may lead to its eventual breakdown. Since such criteria are subject to identity work enabled by Facebook, this chapter will be concerned with *how participants break ludic normativity with regard to specific spatiotemporal conditions and the technological affordances of Facebook*. Let us start with a brief overview of the European migrant crisis and its memetic reinterpretations.

6.1 European migrant crisis in Internet memes

In 2015, the influx of people arriving in Europe and applying for asylum peaked at 1.2 million – a fourfold rise compared with the previous year – creating significant political rifts within the EU and igniting a global media discussion on what has been labeled the migrant or refugee crisis. Iconized by the photo of a three-year-old Syrian boy Alan (Aylan) Kurdi found lying dead on the Turkish beach, countless images of mayhem and dismay on both land and sea dominated headlines around the world and prompted international responses, while also opening a division in the public imaginary over how to deal with the crisis (Pilipets and Winter 2018). The images, or their parts, have frequently been utilized as semiotic resources for Internet memes circulating in two general kinds of discourses on social media: one aimed at gaining support and relief for refugees, the other to denounce welcoming policies, increase border control and facilitate deportation processes (Plascencia 2017; Thelwall 2015).

Social networks have provided an excellent grassroots conductor for the circulation of such discourses with unparalleled speed, reach and influence, making it an effective tool of raising populist voices (Heiskanen 2017). Furthermore, their permeating presence reinforced by endless memetic iterations wield the capacity to employ the ebb and flow of social life, pieces of popular culture and technological affordances for political commentary and increasingly also identity politics (Gal et al. 2016). Although memes pertaining to the migrant crisis have been often described as "preposterous, uncultured, weird, humorous and *silly* expressions" (Pilipets and Winter 2018: 160 original emphasis; cf. Goriunova 2014: 5), the discussions they provoke show a considerable degree of complexity that problematizes binary categorizations (positive/negative, pro-/anti-migration and the like) of the sentiments about the crisis (cf. Nerghes and Lee 2018).

In addressing this complexity, we are, however, faced with analytical problems concerning the communicative affordances and constraints of the online infrastructures challenging many of the established methodological frameworks (Blommaert 2018c; Pennycook 2018). These include, among others, the indeterminacy of social actors participating in the comment sections (social media accounts may be computer-operated 'bots' while others can be closed, anonymous or simply 'fake'), new types of ephemeral and seemingly *ad hoc* sociality (forms of groupness or togetherness coalescing and pertaining only to a particular meme), and the non-linear aspects of meaning-making and identity work reaching beyond the immediate interaction (e.g. accessing one's profile information and prior communicative inputs). In this view, the techno-social infrastructure of Facebook constitutes more than background context. It is an exploitable reservoir of indexical cues and resources not available in 'offline' communication that needs to be taken into consideration if we wish to understand the ways in which participants invoke, negotiate and ratify sentiments about the crisis.

To this end, this chapter draws on Simondon's theory of individuation (1989, 2009) which adds useful conceptual points to the chronotopic framework that accounts for the stochastic interrelation not only between the individual and the social but also the technical in communicative action. It proposes that both individuals and collectivities engaging with crisis-memes emerge (individuate) concurrently, along with epistemic, affective and ideological stances that participants display towards the crisis and towards one another in the comment sections. Adopting this approach sets the analytical lenses to *the nano-politics of identity* (Parkin 2016) in terms of concrete effects of breaking ludic normativity on a moment-to-moment (comment-to-comment) basis, and to observe the multi-layered complexity in the sentiments about the crisis against the backdrop of specific chronotopic representations of the crisis and migrants.

6.2 Facebook, identity and Simondon

Similarly to other social media, Facebook users construct, perform and inhabit multifaceted and multi-sited identities unfolding in a number of interactional contexts (updating, editing and modifying individual profiles as well as 'liking', 'sharing', commenting or otherwise reacting to published content dispersed over countless sites) which are archived,

accessible (albeit depending on privacy settings), mediated and ordered through technology (i.e. algorithms sorting out the visibility of such contexts and their relevance for others). Identity work thus informs and is informed by the techno-social infrastructure and cannot be established *a priori* in analysis. And while such environments are predicated on constant flux, we find observable patterns of communication (e.g. reiterating Countryball stereotypes) pointing to interactionally negotiated identities and identity claims (e.g. expressing alignment with the Countryball satire) and categorizations (e.g. taking Countryballs seriously rather than as a 'joke') which in turn index some degree of social cohesion and organization (Countryball communities). At the same time, we also observe 'light' types of loose and ephemeral collectivities organized around temporal interests, lifestyles, causes or events (often reflected in Internet memes) based on phatic forms of sociality and elastic membership (Blommaert and Varis 2015; cf. Maly and Varis 2016).

Inspired by Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of technology and his theory of individuation (1989, 2009), identity will be here approached as an emergent and tentative by-product (or effect) of communicative actions that, at the same time, feed into the techno-social infrastructure facilitating them. This marks move from specific human users utilizing and crafting specific linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources in rendering specific identities and alignments on social media (Seargeant and Tagg 2014; Leppänen et al. 2017) to communicative and interactional phenomena showing an increasingly intertwined relationship between human and non-human, infrastructural and artifactual entities involved in identity work pertaining to the online-offline nexus (Pennycook 2018; Dovchin and Pennycook 2018).

Simondon's point of departure is individuation – an on-going process in which the individual perpetually comes into being (Simondon's dictum is that being is becoming) as part of resolving conflict or incompatibility with the social and environmental milieu. The conflict arises in, for example, arguments about the supposed reading of Countryball memes on a particular Countryball page. Individuation is inevitably a *co-individuation* between individuals and their environment; that is, in this case, the collectivity (or 'collective' in Simondon's terms) of people subscribing to and/or engaging with a Facebook page on the one hand, and Facebook's interface and infrastructure with its affordances and constraints on communicative action on the other. According to Simondon (2009), the individuated subject arises as a transient result of individuation, not as its instigator (the subject is an effect, not a cause), whereby identities, individuals and communities are to be viewed as interrelated and emergent rather than self-constituted, closed or finished entities.

Simondon's emphasis on ontogenesis (becoming) rather than ontology (being) sets his approach apart from Durkheimian and Durkheim-influenced sociology in which the link between the individual and the social (or the collective) is ontological and presupposes that "collective tendencies have an existence of their own [and that] they too affect he individual from without" (Durkheim 1951: 309). By giving analytical precedence to ontogenesis, Simondon presents a relational approach that is not concerned with a need to postulate an ontological or methodological primacy in the 'micro' or the 'macro' (Bencherki 2017: 779), nor with reconciling the two levels or bridging the gap between

them (cf. Giddens 1984; Latour 2005). Instead, Simondon privileges *action itself* rather than the social actors or systems at play. Observe how the focus on action places Simondon's approach in proximity to the tradition of Mead (1962), Goffman (1974, 1981) and others (summarized as 'symbolic interactionism' by Blumer 1969).

But Simondon's understanding of action extends beyond particular acts of meaning-making situated in particular interactions. For Simondon, action marks change in a sense of resolving a pre-individual affective-emotional tension or conflict (instigated here by the Countryball memes). Resolving the tension leads to individuation, whereby observable acts of individuation (e.g. comments acting on the ludic-serious tension) are only 'left-overs' of this pre-individual state.[20] As Grosz puts it: "Simondon is interested in understanding how pre-individual forces, the forces that constitute the condition for both natural and technological existence, not yet individuated, produce individuals of various kinds" (2012: 38). Focusing on the reflexive and indexical left-overs of individuation, I will consider such forces as chronotopically conditioned. However, before addressing the chronotopic aspects of individuation, its communicative and technological dimensions reaching beyond the individual need to be outlined first.

6.3 Transindividual individuation of memetic chronotopes

Individuation never occurs in isolation – it is always related to the individual's interior ('psychic' individuation concerning the formation of the psychology of individuals, such as personal stance, emotions and normative orientations) as well as exterior ('collective' individuation concerning the formation of the link between such individual states and the individual's social and environmental milieu). Here, Simondon can be read against Bakhtinian dialogism. Simondon argues, alongside Bakhtin, that the interplay between the internal and external is not given but emergent and reciprocal (i.e. dialogic), while it is also inseparable from the milieu in which they occur, thus allowing for a non-static, dynamic perspective on coming-to-being (cf. 'being-as-event' in Bakhtin 1993: 31-32) in which the micro-macro distinction dissolves. From the communicative perspective, for Simondon, language plays a similar role to that posited by symbolic interactionists; it is "the instrument of expression, vehicle of information, but not the creator of significations. Signification is a relation of beings, [...] signification is relational, collective and transindividual" (Simondon 1989: 200; cf. Blumer 1969: 2). Simondon approaches language as ontologically inseparable from context, whereby the relationship between form and meaning does not occur on its own, but in dialogic relation to the self (individual), others (collective) and spatiotemporal conditions allowing for the interplay between the two (transindividual). By extension, in so far as being is perpetual becoming, context is a dynamic, evolving and largely unstable component of communication rather than abstract

[20] Inspired by modern thermodynamics, Simondon conceives of the pre-individual reality as a metastable reservoir of potentialities for individuation that remains in an unstable equilibrium until disturbed by an affective-emotional tension (human individuation) and/or another form of incompatibility (technical individuation). Its resolution leads to individuation by which a new temporary equilibrium is established (for a critical discussion of the term, see e.g. Scott 2014).

or latent presence that can be readily assumed and/or assigned to pre-existing categories (Szabla and Blommaert 2018).

In a similar vein, technology is a live site of individuation. It necessarily takes into consideration the algorithms operating behind the architecture of a given medium. Every Facebook page brings every one of its posts to the attention of a certain number of people who 'like' the page but do not necessarily subscribe to the same sets of moral values and normative orientations. Simondon builds on and expands earlier theorizations of social systems in cybernetics (i.e. the preoccupation with the principles of organization and control in such systems, cf. Hymes 1964: 24; Bateson 1972) that postulate a main tendency towards homeostatic regulation characterized by reduction or elimination of any divergences from 'normal' functioning on the basis of *inter*individual relations. It is argued that the 'normal' functioning in Countryball collectivities is ludic and thus fundamentally grounded in 'play' (Huizinga 1980), whereby Countryball memes are to be principally conceived of as resources for amusement unconstrained by the gravity of everyday life. However, Simondon adds that at the same time social systems (including such collectivities) also consist of *trans*individual relations (e.g. beliefs, values and orientations), which cannot be predicted within 'normal' functioning, and which allow for the introduction and competition of different normativities that might take hold in subsequent configurations of the system.

I will be concerned with the transindividual aspects of individuation (or 'transindividual individuation' in Simondon's vocabulary), more concretely with individuation resolving ludic-serious tensions through metapragmatically reflexive dialogue among participants which arises from negative evaluation of crisis-related memes (i.e. when the meme is no longer interpreted as ludic). In the Simondonian view, the conditions are themselves individuated and expressed through partial or temporary solutions to these tensions. Inspired by Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotope (expressing the inseparability of time and space with respect to personhood), such solutions can be approached as chronotopic representations intrinsically linked to a particular locale and personhood (Agha 2007a), including models of subjectivity and interpersonal relations. As already noted, chronotopes connect specific time-space arrangements with normative ideological and moral orders that frame specific political, historical, social and cultural phenomena. Memes and comments on them represent testaments to transindividual individuation that invokes spatiotemporal configurations conditioning the production and interpretation of communicative practices and identity work (Blommaert 2015; Karimzad and Catedral 2018). Seen as an impetus for individuation in relation with specific chronotopic conditions, memes (and participants' engagement with them) provide insights into the moral apprehensions of the political and social issues pertaining to the migrant crisis that unfold simultaneously in multiple contexts.

Indeed, discourse on the migrant crisis is undoubtedly rife with moral-evaluative statements concerning nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender, race, class and other categorical identity ascriptions and distinctions, which are chronotopically grounded (Blommaert and De Fina 2018). Remember that particular chronotopic configurations define the diacritics of success and failure to be recognized not only as *good* or *bad* but also in terms of more fine-grained categories, such as *true*, *accurate*, *authentic*, *appropriate*

and other blends of epistemic/moral judgments and evaluations (Goodwin 2007). The images of the migrant crisis posited and mediated through Internet memes land in different social niches and the social effects they produce can be approached as chronotopic representations that

> enlarge the 'historical present' of their audiences by creating chronotopic displacements and cross-chronotope alignments between here-and-now and persons altogether elsewhere, transposing selves across discrete zones of cultural spacetime through communicative practices that have immediate consequences for how social actors in the public sphere are mobilized to think, feel and act (Agha 2007a: 324).

This translocal experience is facilitated by the core nature of Internet memes – their capacity to imitate and reiterate linguistic and discursive-semiotic fragments of other chronotopes, by which they simultaneously connect various social and cultural timespaces through recognizable communicative resources and practices (one can imagine, for example, the countless variations and resemiotizations of the 'horse dance' from the 2012 K-pop hit single *Gangnam Style*, see Hou 2018). Such communicative practices, Agha contends, are not devoid of tensions and paradoxes in the social effects they produce. They are constantly invoked, affirmed, negotiated and/or challenged in mundane, everyday interactions through historically shaped and socioculturally loaded indexicals. While such presuppositions surface as individual action (e.g. comments) rendering particular chronotopic representations, their significance is ratified collectively through locally enacted processes of authentication, legitimization or verification. Thus, for example, chronotopic representations of the migrant crisis circulated through Countryball memes may be accepted as a ludic form of humorous expression (in accordance with the ludic presuppositions stemming from the indexical orders of the Countryball genre) as well as opposed as a serious form of political commentary and advocacy. The result is dependent on both individual and collective individuation that coalesces into a particular social formation making up the comment section.

The process of individuation can be and often is ratified along different lines or normative criteria that bespeak multiscalar granularity in the chronotopic representations of the crisis and their discursive uptake. The notion of scale becomes useful as it helps to identify how signs constituting memes "widen or narrow the range of potential referents as well as the outcome of discursive processes that increase or decrease a sign's potential for uptake" (Goebel and Manns 2018: 6; cf. 'scopes of understandability' in Blommaert 2015). The ludic-serious tension can be explained as the problem of different scales that triggers individuation. As geopolitical satire memes, Countryball memes weave together multiple signs of different values and scales developed in different chronotopes (such as those appearing in serious political debates or press), which are modified and recontextualized to generate a semiotic configuration of personhood (e.g. migrants or Europeans) in terms of meaning-making activity at a lower, more niched scale (e.g. in ludic light communities pertaining to Facebook meme pages). The discrepancy between different scales

is subsequently navigated by the participants through the prism of their normative ratifications as part of individuation in relevant participant frameworks.[21] Importantly, as part of individuation, these processes of ratification are predicated not only on the situated communicative input (e.g. individual comments in a particular page) but also on technological affordances offered by the platform; more precisely, on the access to profiles containing discernable identity diacritics, against which the input is also measured. The following section lays out some relevant specifics of the Countryball genre with two examples, which will provide background for the discussion of their uptake.

6.4 Analysis

This section compares excerpts from both *POLANDBALL* and *Czechball* pages in view of the responses to breaking ludic normativity therein. Attention is paid specifically to the posts and comments pertinent to the migrant crisis in the light of the controversy surrounding the EU's plans to implement the disputed quota plan, followed by legal actions against eastern states refusing to participate. Both excerpts are set against the backdrop of the tense political atmosphere across the whole EU in the aftermath of the crisis and other related concerns (Nič 2016). The issue was palpable in all major 2017 election campaigns and subsequent negotiations across all of Europe (e.g. the French presidential election, German federal election, Czech legislative election or Austrian legislative election). While giving rise to the far-right movements and increasing prominence of anti-immigration rhetoric and policies (Davis and Deole 2018), the refusal to abide with the valid relocation scheme and reluctance to fulfil the legal obligations in accepting a share of asylum seekers eventually crystallized into a formal complaint by the European Commission against the Visegrad countries, including Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (Europa.eu 2017).

The vast majority of Countryball comics depicting the issue mostly aligns with the collective stance taken by the Visegrad countries in keeping with what could be called the 'anti-migrant camp', although the discussions in the comment sections call for a more nuanced approach and vocabulary. Starting with the strip published on the *POLANDBALL* page (Figure 7), we are reminded of the heteroglossic facets of Countryball register as the indexical trope 'Germoney' reframes the European negotiations over the migrant crisis into a well-known scenario: school detention. The whole frame of this disciplinary action constitutes a chronotopic configuration that clearly defines power relations in the narrative through established roles of an indisputable principal (Germany) and subservient students (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland). As the design suggests, the comics are based on a simple, accessible format that supports its grassroots nature (i.e. anyone can draw one since it does not require any advanced artistic competence or mastery of a graphics

[21] The term refers to Goodwin's (1990: 11) distinction from Goffman's (1974, 1981) 'participation frameworks' as a gloss to cover two interlaced processes structuring social organization through interaction: first, activities by which participants align toward each other in specific ways (e.g. addresser-accuser, addressee-defendant) and second, how relevant parties are frequently characterized or depicted through such alignments via indexical tropes.

editing software) with one interesting corollary – it evokes a child-like discourse to alleviate the gravity of the situation, and to make the satire socially acceptable even though it sometimes accommodates potentially offensive content. Through appropriating the national and sociocultural stereotypes as part of narrative patterns and scripts, the comics are effective in their capacity to provoke an affective response, carving up a path to further "hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic [and] hyper-distanced adaptations" (Pilipets and Winter 2018: 169; Milner 2016).

Figure 7. Posted on POLANDBALL, June 10, 2017; excerpted on March 15, 2018

Looking closely at the image, it is possible to recognize several heteroglossic details that are nevertheless significant in this respect. First the mixed linguistic practices drawing on communicative resources from multiple languages, such as grafting the Hungarian digraph *sz* onto English orthography (*girls* to 'girlsz'), approximating phonological inventories between English and German (*this* /ðis/ to 'zis') or replacing entire cognate words (*what* to 'was?'). Heteroglossia serves as an indispensable facet of the Countryball satire

by dint of foregrounding artificiality in the sense of highlighting or exaggerating emblematic communicative features associated with particular languages or accents. Furthermore, this goes beyond purely linguistic performance to semiotic (e.g. note the small LGBT and EU flags at the table) and discursive levels in which characters are portrayed and interpreted along the ludic lines of the Countryball genre. More concretely, the ludic reading of the comics strip is further reinforced by a resemiotization of the opening sequence from the popular animated tv series *The Simpsons* featuring a mischievous student Bart repeating the same message on the chalkboard in his elementary school as a punishment. The message changes every episode and has become known as the 'chalkboard gag' (Turner 2004: 71) since it often contains intertextual links to pop culture or whimsical references to contemporary social and political events.

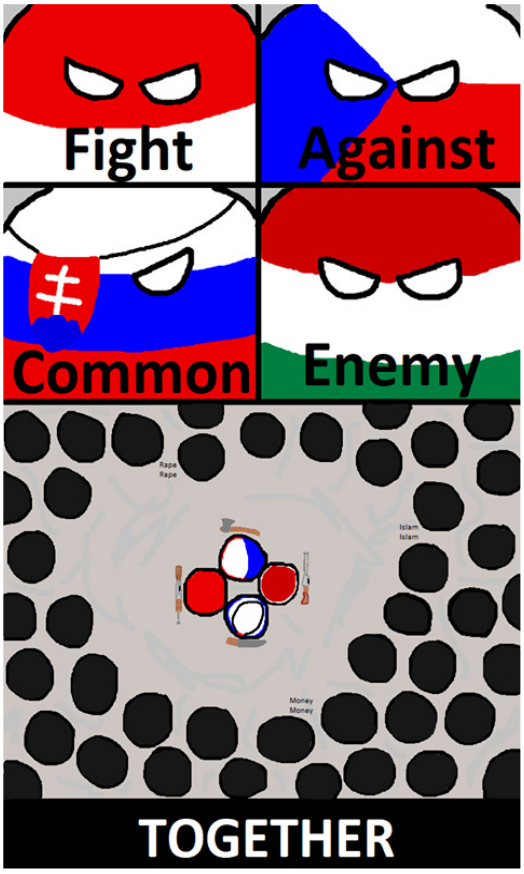


Figure 8. Posted on Czechball, August 11, 2017; excerpted on March 20, 2018

Rendering the crisis via Countryball comics on *Czechball* page differs from that on the *POLANDBALL* page notably in the absence of satirical layers. A good example is presented in Figure 8 portraying Visegrad countries in a heroic last stand against what seems to be

a foreign invasion, invoking a chronotopic chunk of historical conditions (Blommaert 2015) redolent of the notorious Battle of Thermopylae. Locked in an impossible military situation and united by a common enemy, the Visegrad countries, like the allied Greek city-states in 480 BC, are portrayed *vis-à-vis* an overwhelming force threatening to 'rape' women, take 'money' and secure dominance of 'Islam' (as shouted by the invading 8balls[22] in the picture). The invoked chronotope also brings another important aspect into the picture, namely the idea of the very existence being at stake – that of the possibility of losing traditions, culture and way of life in general, as professed by many high-profile populist voices. In the same vein, a closer inspection of the weapons held by the countryballs reveals at least two indexically-laden semiotic items: a traditional Slavic battle axe and what resembles an AK-47 assault rifle. While the former dates back to the earliest periods of Slavic tribes, the latter marks a hallmark of Soviet weaponry that is still being used in post-Soviet countries, though in a variety of modified versions. Both items, however small, are employed as semiotic tropes conveying cross-chronotopic continuity, coherence and consistency; they connect distant pasts with the contemporary present while evoking a sense of brotherhood further cementing the unity and resolution to preserve the shared legacy. The strip on Figure 8 thus embodies predominantly a political message or incentive rather than a ludic-satirical rendering of the (geo)political climate surrounding the crisis. But interestingly enough, this cross-chronotopic synchronization of different signs also gives rise to voices and incentives corroding the seemingly unified and homogenous image of the anti-migrant sentiment, as will be demonstrated in the excerpts from the discussions in the comment sections below.

Excerpt 5. "How the fuck are you supposed to meet a muslim in real life living in Recife, Brazil?"

The fifth excerpt comes from a 28-comment-long discussion taking place in the comment section below the strip in Figure 7 on the *POLANDBALL* page. The discussion is prompted by Participant 1, who dismisses the satire portrayed in the comics, placing it on par with mere proliferation of right-wing propaganda based on unfounded preconceptions. His reasoning and argumentation behind the dismissive claim are subsequently attacked by nearly half of the following comments from other participants. The first five comments are sufficient for illustration. Since there are several segments in a single discussion thread, the number of individual comments are also marked in their succession for better orientation in the thread. As usual, parentheses () indicate my translation if the comment is not in English, square brackets [] contain my explanatory notes and braces {} signal tagging other participants. The texts have not been edited otherwise.

[22] According to Polandball Wiki, 8ball (Africaball) is a metonymic representation of historical Africans or African tribes without a flag (hence the black color), including their descendants that have later migrated to Europe. By extension, 8balls have recently been employed to depict all migrants to Europe.

Comment no.	Participant no.	Text of the comment
1	**Participant 1**:	Typical rightist propaganda. Cant come up with coherent arguments, so it has to limit itself to distorting other peoples ideologies. Nobody is arguing in favor of "bullying Christians" or "installing Sharia Law". Refugees are being accepted because most of them are just normal people trying to escape war and terror. Refusing them because of the 1 in 1.000.000 rotten apple is downright cowardice. Suicide bombers are scary and flashy, but if you look at the numbers, its a stastically insignificant cause of death. You might as well ban peanuts, they kill several times more people through choking or allergies and are just as likely to "take over Europe".
2	**Participant 2**:	It's a meme.
3	**Participant 3:**	aqui o tipico estupido. (here is a typical dumb person.)
4	**Participant 4:**	Typical leftist reaction. It's a joke, genius.
5	**Participant 5:**	Shut the fuck up
6	**Participant 6:**	Then take a few refugees to your home

Most of the comments reproaching P1 are derived from the fact that P1 breaks from the ludic frame initiated by the (Countryball) memes. His taking the meme at face value signals a serious mode of engagement with rational reasoning which runs counter to the satirical conception of the comics, and the ludic mode of interaction espoused by Countryball memes. In the words of Huizinga (1980: 11-12), P1 becomes a 'spoilsport', who is to be repudiated because he threatens the very fabric of social reality therein. P2 and P4 thus invoke the ludic normative-moral order as a baseline for interpreting memes[23] while P5 and P6 resort to dismissive directives. Finally, P3 answers with an insult in Brazilian Portuguese – a linguistic choice that will be addressed later. What needs to be noted is that P1 sets a divisive standpoint ("Typical rightist propaganda") right from the onset, which quickly colors the ensuing argument into political trench warfare which lays out the reciprocally opposing ideological positions in the participant framework (e.g. "Typical leftist reaction" by P4 and "Then take a few refugees to your home" by P6). Eventually, P1 feels pushed to respond to the critique and clarify his standing:

[23] Both P2 and P4 use alleviating phrases "It's a meme" and "It's a joke" respectively. Both phrases have been documented as frequently recurring devices in rhetorical strategies to dispel serious interpretations of derogatory memes or memes containing extremist content with several important side effects. Most notably, packing or framing memes as mere jokes and dismissing those not willing or not able to acknowledge their humorous potential contributes to the 'normalization' and increased presence of the problematic content and ideologies in the mainstream media, and subsequent fracturing of its audiences into micro-populations (Maly and Varis 2016) or micropublics (Marshall 2014) distinguished by different discursive and affective orientations to the memes in question. P1 is well aware of this danger as we shall see in his following comment, but I will return to this issue in Chapter 8 from a more general perspective.

11 **Participant 1**: I realize its meant as a joke, I even laughed at it. I choose to comment because i know there plenty of people who take this as a joke but also belive the message behind it and use those same arguments. Also, people commenting here must be really retarded to not realize they just prove my point by spamming this "autism" bs [bullshit]. Gtfo [get the fuck out] and come back if you have real arguments.

Initially, P1 seemingly (re)aligns with the ludic-normative expectations, acknowledging also the humorous aspects of the satire and even admitting to having a laugh, which might be interpreted as a partial change in 'footing' (Goffman 1981), but it will be shown that this is not the case. He displays awareness of the ludic order in its complexity ("I realize its meant as a joke", "i know plenty of people" and "people commenting here") – the intricate cross-chronotopic nestings: the norms pervading the communicative space where the Countryball post is located within a given Countryball page in connection with wider Countryball universe, and the fact that each layer brings together different audience constellations, yet remains grounded in the ludic order that marks the memetic genre of Countryball. Consequently, it is the reiteration of the form that lends itself to recognizability, which in turn secures its sociocultural coherence of the ludic order. This is precisely the extent to which P1 aligns with the ludic normativity; however, in this particular case he engages in a metapragmatic dialogue against it in two directions. On the one hand, he retains his original footing by specifying the rationale behind the first comment, namely the assumption that there are people who "belive the message behind it and use those same arguments", more precisely that there are non-participants (i.e. mere readers or 'lurkers' in modern jargon) who would not recognize the ludic baseline given the fact that not everybody has a sufficient level of access to the Countryball universe to recognize it. On the other hand, those who do respond to him in defense of the ludic normativity are not ratified as valid participants. On the contrary, they collectively dispatched as "really retarded" while their arguments are not accepted as "real" or substantial; their communicative inputs are invalidated as "'autism' bs".[24]

The reason splitting P1's response between non-participating lurkers and responding participants can be understood in terms of Simondon's 'technics' – a relational process of circumstantial creation and innovation wherein concrete machines (e.g. meme generators and meme templates or even whole meme genres) enter into complex and dialogic relation with their environments, including human as well as non-human agency (cf. Stiegler 1998). And as Letiche and Moriceau (2017: 4) point out, "society's technics stand in relationship to its values, possibilities and creativity" in the sense that participants share (to varying degrees) states of pre-individuality, yet the vectors of individuation may differ depending on the particular social constellations (audiences) coagulating around a particular post. P1 is concerned that the techno-social conduits of Facebook (the affordance

[24] 'Autism' is frequent trope in memetic discourses employed as a sweeping and/or mocking insult drawing on the characteristic impairments of social interaction, such as restricted and repetitive behavior (Know Your Meme 2013a: "Autism").

of sharing content among individuals, groups, other pages etc.) will bring the meme to different audiences (not necessarily consisting of Countryball fans) with likely non-ludic interpretation, possibly hijacking the format to further a political agenda, which leads him to change the participant framework. The following part of the discussion illuminates the significance of the technics in terms of further modulation of the participant framework upon engaging with another participant.

19 **Participant 17**: How the fuck are you supposed to meet a muslim in real life living in Recife, Brazil? The left shouldnt support muslims, as muslims approach towards civil rights is very similar than the far right's views. Do you want your country flooded with millions of little bolsonaros?

21 **Participant 1**: {**Participant 17**} Eu não sei que tipo de imagem absurda os paulistas tem de Recife e outras capitais do nordeste, mas é ÓBVIO que existem muçulmanos aqui, ja tive dois colegas de classe e um professor que são islamicos, sem contar com as dezenas que ja encontrei pelas mídias sociais. Eu não gosto nem um pouco da visão de mundo dos muçulmanos, mas não ao ponto de deixa-los apodrecer em uma terra de ninguem como o Iraque ou a Síria.

(I do not know what kind of absurd image the Paulistas have of Recife and other capitals of the northeast, but it is OBVIOUS that there are Muslims here, I already had two classmates and a teacher who are Islamic, not counting the dozens that I have already found by social media. I do not like the world view of Muslims at all, but not to the point of letting them rot in a land of no one like Iraq or Syria.)

Being able to extract personal information or recognize emblematic traits of one's identity, such as ethnicity or nationality, from one's profile appears to be a key factor in identity work and individuation on Facebook. Thus, seeing P1 as of Brazilian nationality, P3 chooses to address P1 in Brazilian Portuguese to issue a more personal insult. Likewise, P17 brings the argument to local scale by dint of invoking chronotopic conditions pertinent to P1's home region (Recife) located in the northeast of Brazil. Interestingly, however, by specifying the country to which the city belongs (Brazil), the message is clearly addressed to the entire audience rather than just P1 (note also that P17 mentions "your" rather than *our* country even though she too is later identified as Brazilian). This alignment and scalar shift to local milieu serve to expose and (dis)individuate P1 in two important ways. On the one hand, she attempts to discredit P1's point of view by pointing to the general scarcity of the Muslim population in Brazil, which is largely situated in southeastern states São Paulo and Paraná (as opposed to P1's northeastern region), rendering his arguments baseless. On the other hand, she assumes that P1 is a left-leaning person based on his denunciation of "rightist propaganda" (1.), which is likewise discredited by

linking "The left" and "muslims approach" while putting this shared "view" on par with that of the far-right (19.). Furthermore, she deploys a powerful indexical "bolsonaros" invoking far-right populist discourses connected with Jair Bolsonaro, a controversial far-right politician and then-candidate for the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections. This has significant bearings on the subsequent response by P1 who directs his response solely to P17, as he switches to Brazilian Portuguese and singles out P17 as one of "Paulistas" (i.e. denizens of São Paulo), by which the whole participant framework changes.

P17's retrieving and utilizing the word 'Recife' as well as P1's 'Paulistas' serve as indexical 'shifters' (Silverstein 1976) that facilitate identification of spatiotemporal and personal deictics, which in turn enable a shift in participant roles and interaction. Following Goebel and Manns (2018: 8), 'Recife' might be described as a 'scalar shifter' employed to "organize units and unitizations of scale in discourse to enable the identification of relevant participant frameworks with respect to timespace". In this vein, P17 down-scales global discourse on the migrant crisis to local, or more specifically, regional time-space configurations, by which she also narrows down the participant framework. In addition, the term 'Paulistas' also represents a 'cultural shifter' used to "organize units and unitizations of personhood in discourse to enable the identification of relevant participant frameworks with respect to group membership" (Goebel and Manns 2018: 7). P1 in this sense draws attention to the underlying socioeconomic divide in the country, namely the difference in chronotopic representations of the poorer north and northeast (including Recife) and richer south and southeast (including São Paulo), which also allows him to sustain credibility of his footing by recounting personal experience that runs counter to P17's claims. It can be also noted that the personal encounter is jointly negotiated as a prerequisite before any moral-evaluative judgments and value attributions with regard to the term 'muslim' (and being "Islamic") can be ratified.

Generally speaking, P1 individuates by performing a number of defensive moves which might also be interpreted as attempts to establish and maintain a sober interaction in order to prevent potentially harmful or toxic effects under the ludic frame of the comics. It might be possible to see P1's communicative inputs as moment-to-moment points in his individuation process steering towards factual discourse – refusing the apparently propaganda-bent take on the migrant crisis (1.), denouncing the positive relational work towards the ludic portrayal by other members of the community, yet confessing to have enjoyed the humor in the comics (11.), and dismissing the portrayal of the spatiotemporal conditions from which he speaks (21.). The process is illustrative of the transindividual disindividuation – P1 struggles for seriousness in a way, which is not ratified by the ludic light community, thus posing an obstacle to effectuation of the pre-individual potential, and by extension, to his individuation. His individuation then rests on discontinuing or renouncing the ludic normativity and sociality pertinent to the community throughout the course of unfolding interaction, and renegotiating his position in the community. Considering that countryball communities share, to some extent, a common pre-individuality, tracking similar trajectories through interaction might shed some light on the organization of the interaction since it is a product of the pre-individual possibility, realized collectively by dint of the technics.

While the discussion in the first excerpt featured an easily distinguishable trajectory of individuation (P1 vs. the environment), the following excerpt addresses a number of convening, as well as discordant, trajectories in chronotopic work. It will show that even when the ludic order is less pertinent to the community (i.e. when a similar resolution of the ludic-serious tension is in fact ratified by part of the community), similar courses of (dis)individuation might not be mutually ratified.

Excerpt 6. "Fake heroes and overreacting biggots"

The sixth excerpt presents fragments from a 61 comment-long discussion taking place in the comment section below the Figure 8, which was posted on the *Czechball* page. The discussion starts with Participant 1 (P1) directly attacking the key indexical attribute invoked by the comics – heroism – by invalidating its fundamental nature, namely that of an impending threat. By referring to statistics, P1 unveils its perceived spuriousness which he consequently attributes to the current populist discourses on anti-immigration in Visegrad countries. Although this move could again be classified as a transgressive individuation against the ludic nature laminating Countryball pages, the reactions also include positive responses in contrast to P1 from the fifth excerpt (henceforth P1E5) originating from the *POLANDBALL* page.

1	**Participant 1**:	But there's 0 muslims on your countries you ain't got to fight shit? You're acting like Americans. Fake heroes and overreacting biggots
2	**Participant 2**:	Surrounded, dood [dude]
3	**Participant 1**:	Surrounded? lol [laughing out loud]
4	**Participant 3**:	{**Participant 1**} you are absolutely true. 
5	**Participant 1:**	When i Wiki the amount of muslim in Czech, Polska, Magyar [Hungary] and Slvak i see not even 1% LOL. All your neighbours, even Germany for Polan, don't even reach 5-6% muslim. Islam is not even 5% of entire EU right now How the fuck can you be surrounded by 5% of Europe, of which 0,1% lives in your countries? Idiots, delusionals lol And i am atheïst and i hate Religion, I'm not here to defend Islam, trust me. But you have stay real, man
6	**Participant 1:**	{**Participant 3**} yeah i probably get hate reacts from Nazi Slavs, i don't care, we all know my facts are true see Wiki Oh and by the way, i love Czech's gun laws, i have 0 problem with that. I would actually consider going to Czech if they leave EU

The bone of contention remains similar to the fifth excerpt – the license to criticize in the matter of migration is predicated on genuine experience or encounter with Muslims and their presence in specific chronotopic conditions. P1 stands his ground and displays a relatively high degree of responsiveness to both supportive and dismissive replies. Similarly to P1E5, he dismisses the portrayal of the corollaries stemming from the migrant crisis, urging P2, whom he views as a mouthpiece of dismissive voices 'taking it seriously', to "stay real". However, despite the seriousness of the argument, both P1 and P2 deploy familiarizing vocatives "dood"[25] (2.) and "man" (5.) indexing social proximity, which also allows P1 to also address P2 in a more personally-friendly tone.

In addition, he also attempts to establish rapport with supportive respondents (P3), although such responses are rare compared to the negative ones. This is also reflected in his highlighting a positive alignment with the Czech gun policy in the light of the Czech political as well as public dissent aimed to negate the 2017 EU Directive extending restrictions on gun possession. Another similarity to P1E5 can be found in the effort to establish a non-ludic mode of rational reasoning, which draws on statistics and "facts" while striving for authentic presentation of the self by disclosing personal orientation and intent (e.g. "And i am atheïst and i hate Religion, I'm not here to defend Islam"). Moreover, both P1E5 and P1 attribute strong indexical tropes ("autism" and "Nazi") to their perceived opponents who do not subscribe to the same mode of reasoning. P1 remains unswerving even when P6 invokes local spatiotemporal conditions pertinent to the contemporary situation.

13	**Participant 6**:	Well idk [I don't know] about you Netherlandish guy, but in Czechia it matters a lot cuz [because] Elections soon.... A lot parties here wants them in and even presidential candidates wishes them here
14	**Participant 1**:	Well... You should vote anti-Immigration obviously. I do too. Unfortunately, many Dutch people, like in other West Euro countries, are too much Leftist and Humanitarian and they would invite EVERYONE here lol... All I'm saying is, don't act like you are already having problems with immigration / muslims, because you don't even have 0,5%

Like P17 in the first excerpt, P6 gains knowledge about P1's Dutch nationality from his profile and utilizes it to underline the contrast in chronotopic representations through deictics anchoring to a place ("in Czechia"), time ("Elections soon") and personhood with respect to stancetaking ("Well idk about you Netherlandish guy"). P6 is thus able to question P1's imposed insights without inciting conflict with the help of prepositioned hedges "Well" and "idk". P1 reaffirms his footing via the scalar shifter "West Euro countries" that performs an upward scale-jump from situated (Dutch/Czechia) chronotopic conditions to

[25] A derivative of 'dude'. According to Urban Dictionary (2009), its usage oscillates between '[a] word you use to refer to your close friend" and "[w]hat you say when someone is fucking with you and you want them to stop" (n. pag.).

wider international geographical ("West Euro Countries") and political ("Leftist and Humanitarian") constellations.

In the course of his exchange with multiple other participants, P1 continually informs others about his understanding of the relevant chronotopic conditions and his positioning towards or in them. Three pieces of information are crucial for P13 who subsequently engages in a conflict with P1 approximately from the middle of the discussion thread: P1's willingness or readiness to leave his country (6.), relegation of his anticipated opponents to the adherents of Nazi ideology (6.), and purportedly welcoming view of his (Western) compatriots (14.). Although P1 and P13 could be easily recognized as anti-immigration proponents, their interaction and chronotopic work reveals a finer gradient in such normative categories. Their conflicting divergence is highly reminiscent of the schismogenesis process described by Bateson (1935) as "a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals" (175).

35	**Participant 13**:	{**Participant 1**} if i would be you a would care about my home the netherlands. If you like it or not we hungarians are not going to let them in. We have dignity. Call us nazi fun fact one we were. Call us racist fun fact two we are. Atleast we know where are we belongs. When in the netherlands beetween the newborns the most fovourite name is mohammed i would shout off my mouth. Btf [by the way] hungary is not a jungle these migrants has money if they want to go germany then buy an airplane ticket thats it. Not central europe is dying. Its western europe. We eated in two world wars your ancestors sickness. Not anymore. If you want to filled your home with third words rats. And want that your child or grand child will be a subhuman then do it. Just dont try to act like smart... because you dont know anything. Btf [by the way] i am atheist aswell.
36	**Participant 1**:	And then why do Hungarians come to the West? 😉 You easterners keep complaining about muslims, but you yourselves are migrating everywhere for the €€€ criminals too! 😉 You're unfair, hypocrits

Both P1 and P13 profile themselves as atheists and supporters of nationalism sharing anti-immigration sentiments, yet their invoked (or imagined) chronotopic representations of such sentiments differ dramatically, and throughout the exchange they continue to diverge even more (note the winking smileys conveying sanctimoniousness). This divergence continues along the intersecting axis of 'thick' identity categories, including race, class and gender. In his first comment (35.), P13 targets specifically race category, openly admitting to being racist (as a "fun fact") while comparing migrants with "third words rats" and their descendants as "subhuman", which is the reason why Western Europe "is dying". Accepting P1's pre-categorization of his opponents, P13 invokes the discourses of Nazism to render his chronotopic depiction of the possible ramifications of the welcoming

policies while diminishing their negative connotations of such discourses by situating them in a moral framework predicated on dignity and historical continuity. Even though P1 does not question P13's race-oriented reasoning, he retains his footing by attributing P13's chronotopic representation to underlying hypocrisy as he highlights the economic reasons motivating migration flows, which also include East-West European migration, thereby giving prominence to class rather than race aspects. The following fragment brings the category of gender and sexual orientation into focus.

39	**Participant 13**:	[…] Your nations was always menthal illed. Worse than russians. Enjoy your gay pride shits. The non existed [non-existent] genders also abortation. Well "mate" creator of the west was greec and they are from the balkan 😉 not from western europe. The west is europe and not western europe. And again not my nation is dying 😉
40	**Participant 1**:	Why are you people so worried about gay pride and gender things? Does it concern you? Do they hurt you or take your freedom..? You are taking theirs though by saying theyre "weak and not real." YOU are the person making the trouble not them 😉 See? You think different, you are different. End of arguement. Don't expect a warm welcome here with such thoughts 😉
43	**Participant 13**:	That country witch is not capable to repuduce themself deserve the oblivion. They did nothing. But when you favorizing themyou and They create the grave of your nation 😉. No child no no future 😉 "your freedom" sure.
44	**Participant 1**:	Just accept that you're no different than a muslim for me 😉 other culture, other thoughts, other language, hating gays lol [laughing out loud] just like a muslim. What's the difference?

P13 continues along the same transnational scale to recount the reasons for the alleged demise of the Western Europe, which brings him to the issues of gender, more precisely to "non existed genders" (39.) as well as "gay pride shits" (39.). P1 then insists that P13 gives arguments to support his claims while questioning his authenticity in terms of belonging to the Western civilization given P13's claims and insinuations which are in fact "no different than a muslim" (44.). What lies at the heart of such qualities in fact resonates with Huntington's (1993) controversial 'clash of civilizations' discourse that posits a characterization of Islam as antithetical to a wide range of Western values (e.g. gender equality, sexual diversity, democracy and universalism), which will likely be a source of future conflict between Western and Islamic civilizations in the post-Cold War world. This depiction then attains to an invoked chronotope in which such qualities of "muslim" become a benchmark for value attributions and judgments laid by the participants, e.g. "hating gays lol just *like a muslim*" (39.) or "Your nations was always *menthal illed*" (44.).

Although the comment thread cannot be discussed here in its entirety, the discussed fragments suffice to show that P1's individuation throughout his exchange with P13 and

other participants gives evidence of an emerging intersectional perspective that continually informs the chronotopic representations on multiple scales. The scales range from lower scale levels of specific nation-states to the higher scale levels of the transnational East-West divide in Europe to universal, borderless imagined qualities of Islam followers that are, in turn, superimposed via the indexical "muslim" onto lower scale levels. "muslim" becomes a mutually shaped matrix through which participants understand, assign meaning, and display a stance toward 'big' sociological category diacritics, such as nationality, race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality in concrete spatiotemporal terms. In this sense, "muslim" becomes the unwanted, sinister Other and lies at the center of an affective-emotional tension which fuels the individuation processes – it binds both participants in a reciprocal individuation which puts the invoked chronotopic representations into question. Although they both seem to view "muslim" in a negative light – the relation between form, function and meaning of "muslim" and other indexicals is not predefined or given. Rather, it is constantly negotiated throughout the interactional exchange in relation to particular chronotopic conditions and their representations as the participants attempt to impute intelligibility to their own actions. Finally, the exchange between P1 and P13 concludes with a stalemate as both participants eventually agree to disagree.

54	**Participant 13**:	No more free living life for the west. Stealing our markets and money. This easy life coming to its and [end]. And not central europe will be in a civil war. We dont need the ussr. 🙂 since the eu is the same. And it will end up on that level just like the soviets. And once again hungary will be the key player 😉. Your opinion is without anything logic its jujt filled with pure hate. Without anyking of logical answers. Not your opinion is my problem
55	**Participant 13**:	Just with your empty answers
56	**Participant 1**:	OK good then go away and don't talk to me no more? This is my comment you don't have to be here 😀 Hungary key player... Pfwahaha. I don't believe any of it 😉 you won't and can't do shit lol. You're making a whole problem over something that does not even matter to you, and then i have no logic? 😉 And you say i hate, while you are the one continue yapping on race, how we should live, how we are mentally ill etc etc. Stop your projection of your own issues 😉 I have no problems here I'm happy. So if you are happy there, stay there? Build your wall, leave EU, i don't care? So stop caring for us 😉 mind own business

57	**Participant 1**:	Yours are just as empty 😉 "safe the race make baby, no homo pride hurrdurr[26]" lol. Very meaningfull 😉👍
58	**Participant 13**:	Who the fuck said to you how you should live? Dumbass??? You commented under by the visegrad four pitcure. Lets learn a littlebit boy 😉 "homo, racist, bigot" tipycal worlds xddd [indicating laughter] this is the sickness you are not original i hope you know that. Well hungary a has a "tiny"bit more influex [influence] than the netherlands lol
59	**Participant 1**:	Yes very sick i will get a Doctor to check lol. Now i am leaving this discussion because it is totally useless, i learn nothing from you and you not from me 😉 good day and good luck with the babies and wall
60	**Participant 13**:	You know the walls are working the chinasee builded once a wall againts us 😉 and they survived. And a fence and a wall indeed is the same. I dont hate you btf [btw; by the way] dont get me wrong. Just try to think clearly. Or what your belowed western europe did in the last cauple of 3-4 years. Cold war with russia. Created migrants crisis. They blamed hungary and after poland hungary czech republic slovakia. They created the brexit and blackmailed the united states. I cannot wait what will be the next.bye

The stalemate ensues as P13 continues in giving nuance to his chronotopic representation of the Western Europe by invoking a cross-chronotopic alignment between the USSR and EU in which the Eastern (and Central) states of the EU suffer for the economic benefit of the Western states much like they did as former Soviet satellite states under Soviet Union (54.). In addition, the Western Europe is depicted by P13 to be responsible for the challenges it has been facing, namely EU sanctions against Russia and the Russian countersanctions, Brexit, raising tensions in the EU-US relations and finally the migrant crisis (60.). Hence P13 suggests that it seems best for Hungary to leave EU or 'build a wall',[27] while P1 laconically agrees and attempts to close the topic ("Build your wall, leave EU, i don't care? So stop caring for us [...] mind own business", 56.). In Simondon's terms, the transindividual processes of participants' intertwined individuations moves to a new metastable equilibrium in which they have reiterated the differences in their viewpoints but are unable to continue, and the discussion ends with valediction (59. and 60. respectively). Although many interesting points could be discussed at length here (chronotopic work

[26] An interjection commonly used to express sarcastic laughter and/or to criticize a post that is considered stupid or underwhelming (see Know Your Meme 2010a: "Hurr Durr").

[27] Earlier in the discussion, P13 specifically mentions 'building a wall' in the sense of reintroducing an equivalent to the historical Iron Curtain as one of possible solutions, but his reference to the 'wall' should also be understood in the light of Hungary's 2015 decision to build a razor-wire fence along its southern borders to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country and seeking asylum. The decision was criticized by the European Commission for denying asylum-seekers' rights, as well as for violating the Schengen Agreement securing the freedom of movement within EU borders (Juhász 2017).

in espousing nationalism, demonizing specific facets of gender, race and religion by identifying them as mental illnesses or participants' negotiated understanding of 'hate' against the backdrop of 'hate speech' discourses), I will focus on two implications stemming from dismissing the ludic frame and sociality pertaining to the Countryball comics.

First, right from the onset – once the ludic frame is dismissed, the discussion becomes undergirded by non-ludic appeals to logic and rationality (remember that P1 individuates against the perceived hypocrisy in the comics posted on the *Czechball* page). When it comes to the altercation between P1 and P13, the recourse to logic becomes even more explicit towards the end of their exchange: "Your opinion is without anything logic […]" (54.), "You're making a whole problem over something that does not even matter to you, and then i have no logic?" (56.), "Just try to think clearly" (60.). Notice that the communicative exchange between P1 and P13 seems to be accompanied by a shared expectation invested in a Gricean premise of meaningful cooperation – something that both participants accuse each other of violating, for example: "Just with your empty answers" (55.) and correspondingly "Yours are just as empty […] 'safe the race make baby, no homo pride hurrdurr' lol. Very meaningfull […]" (57.), and finally "Now i am leaving this discussion because it is totally useless, i learn nothing from you and you not from me" (59.). In the same vein, there are efforts to keep the discussion impersonal and within general, geopolitical parameters, but the virulence of P13's rather belligerent retorts (culminating in "Who the fuck said to you how you should live? Dumbass???", 58.) seems to drive P1 away in spite of P13's late explanation "I dont hate you btf dont get me wrong" (60.).

The second implication has to do with the participants' contention over the communicative space initiated by P1's remark "This is my comment you don't have to be here" (56.) to which P13 responds: "You commented under by the visegrad four picture" (58.). As mentioned in the previous chapters, communicative space itself can become a normative agent in the sense of imposing layers of expectations and preferences on communicative conduct therein. More concretely, participants may use space as a point of reference upon which individual comments can be measured and judged against normative criteria or orientations invoked by a post in the same way as the individual post may become subject to norms associated with the Facebook page in which it is published. Facebook pages can be likewise evaluated and judged against other pages, platforms and so on. Here, P13's retort denies P1's claiming the communicative space since it is, after all, below a post called by P13 as "visegrad four picture". The fact that P13 choses to refer to the post as a 'picture' rather than 'comics' or any other designation that would signal the ludic underpinning of the Countryball genre testifies to the absence of the satirical features native to the comics. Moreover, P13's choice points to a normative hierarchy. In the eyes of P13, the chronotopic conditions of the post and *its* comment section cannot offer a warm welcome to the kind of individuation enacted by P1. P13's reminder thus circumscribes the possibility of maintaining P1's vector of individuation, ultimately contributing to P1's decision to leave the discussion (59.).

To summarize, P1 in both excerpt 5 (P1E5) and 6 (P1E6) individuate against the ludic frame and uptake of the comics by invoking serious normative orders, yet they are both reproached by others on different grounds, depending on the prominence given to the ludic normativity in a particular social constellation. On the *POLANDBALL* page, P1E5 is

immediately confronted with remainders of the ludic grounding of the comics, to which he responds by defending his standing by highlighting the potential of the satire to be read or misused in favor of the sentiments it satirizes. On the *Czechball* page, P1E6 dismisses ludic reading of the comics in view of its political message devoid of satirical elements, and even earns some support in doing so. In both excerpts respectively, P1E5 and P1E6 individuate from a shared pre-individual reality (having access to the Countryball genre and 'liking' the Countryball pages) through a course of transindividual individuation involving other participants and communicative space intertwined in the production of meaning and identity. The focus on indexicality in participants' metapragmatic accounts helps to identify and follow their vectors of individuation against the ludic representations of the geopolitical ramifications of the migrant crisis and against other participants. Approaching the vectors of individuation with attention to the socio-historical dimension of the chronotopic conditions invoked by the participants opens up a detailed view on participants discursive orientations as they unfold in relational work and unearth the rich gradient behind the seemingly simple binary categories used to classify the sentiments on the migrant crisis.

6.5 Concluding remarks

Simondon's philosophy of technology is undoubtedly dense and this chapter barely scratches its surface, let alone its promising depth.[28] While the rediscovery of Simondon's oeuvre has inspired a number of recent studies examining the social dynamics of digital environments (e.g. Hui and Halpin 2013; Swan 2015; Mills 2016; Nash 2016), these works remain on a general and rather abstract level of Simondon's philosophy.

Here, I have employed Simondon's central concept – individuation – in conjunction with the notion of chronotope to investigate concrete instances of interactional work in participants' individual trajectories of becoming, that is, becoming by differentiating themselves against dominant or expectant normative orders in Countryball pages. This was done with a particular focus on the consequences of intentionally breaking ludic normativity as part of resolving the ludic-serious tension among participants. Resolving the tension subsequently teases out the complexity behind the views and opinions on matters of public attention reinterpreted by the Countryball meme-comics – in this case the European migrant crisis. Following the metapragmatic dialectics of participants' conflicting trajectories of individuation on a comment-to-comment basis offers a means to identify the multilayered complexity behind meanings and identities attributed to key

[28] Simondon's thoughts found resonance only in a small, albeit significant, coterie of admirers from his native French philosophical circles. His works first came into public light as a major source of inspiration for Gilles Deleuze, Bernard Stiegler, Bruno Latour and others interested in the ontological issues surrounding the rapid technologization of our lives (see Iliadis 2013 for an overview). But despite the scarcity of English translations, Simondon's works have recently sparked growing interest across media studies (Mills 2016), organization studies (Bencherki 2017) and other fields concerned with the increasingly complex relationship between technology and humans (De Boever et al. 2012; Combes 2013; Bardin 2015), including the social and cultural aspects of this relationship (Scott 2014).

indexicals in the discourse on the migrant crisis (e.g. "muslim" or "islam") in connection with different scales and chronotopes. There are two things to note in this regard.

First is related to the capacity of Internet memes to trigger transindividual networked individuation. Memes may provide vital cues to understanding the potential of contemporary semiotic production and its uptake in populist discourses centered around nationalist hate, anti-Islamic propaganda and fear mongering. More concretely, participants engaging in breaking ludic normativity around satirical reinterpretations of such discourses yields relatively detailed accounts that testify against the binary oppositions in approaching the strands and sentiments about the migrant crisis. The communicative environments generated by the memes provide additional (ludic) frames through which participants can display and incite a variety of resonating as well as discording narratives and perspectives that are continually introduced, negotiated and/or challenged in terms of different chronotopic representations. This also includes interpersonal relevance with respect to the migrant crisis on different scales ranging from local or regional scope of nation-states to translocal or transnational scales of European Union or the Visegrad countries. In this messy discursive terrain, chronotopic work in individuation shows that while some narratives and perspectives can be easily categorized under a particular strand, for example 'anti-migrant' camp, they might be not mutually recognized as such by their 'proponents'.

The second implication follows the first in consequence of careful attention to the minutiae of the communicative practices – specifically value attribution and moral evaluation as part of individuation processes. Viewed in this way, individuation informs about the largely overlooked granularity in the sense of normativity and how it is reflexively recognized by participants in a given social constellation as it comes into light through the invocation of particular chronotopes. Participants can be well-aware of the normatively polycentric and potentially harmful effects the ludic-satirical portrayals and interpretations of the memetic representations of the migrant crisis, which might trigger their individuation against such representations. Breaking the ludic normativity thus does not necessarily correspond with individual participants merely disagreeing or correcting one another or the comics within the parameters of the Countryball universe, as could be seen in the previous chapters. It is also connected to networked sentiments pertaining to the events and issues reinvented by the comics and the collectivities organized around it – sentiments that fuel affective-emotional tensions continually resolved by individuation with significant bearing on social life in such collectivities. This means, as Excerpt 5 illustrates, that participants respond to and individuate against not only what *is* done in terms of interpretative work in their memetic encounters but also what *could have been* done upon deploying the meme elsewhere.

Finally, what needs to be noted is the techno-social infrastructure of Facebook providing participants with certain levels of access to biographical histories of its users publicly listed on their profiles. Such information – however true or accurate – may enter the processes of individuation and chronotopic work. For example, providing indices about ones' place of residence or origin in their profile may have significant bearing on ratification of their communicative input and perceived validity of their participation in particular dis-

courses. Participants' interactions subsequently shape and reshape the normative-ideological prisms for chronotopic work in such communicative spaces that in turn set the parameters for invoking chronotopes and the subsequent negotiation of their representation.

Generally speaking, Simondon's theory of individuation invites us to look at how technology, individuals, groups, communities and other entities, both human and non-human, arise not *in* but *as* dynamic and reciprocal relations. It offers a hitherto largely unexplored perspective on how contemporary transcultural flows foster the emergence of countless elaborate appearances and modes of self-presentation on a daily basis through a dialogic relationship with the technics, and how they fall into normative patterns. The following chapter looks more closely at the intrinsic relation between the techno-social infrastructures and negation of ludic normativity; or more precisely, how Facebook users understand and adapt or resist to recently increasing intensity in Facebook content curating practices shaping ludic normativity in Countryball pages, and how such practices lead to the re-construction of its particular elements.

CHAPTER 7

‘Don’t post offensive memes then’: Re-constructing ludic normativity

In late September 2016, an alliance of Facebook pages organized around Internet memes announced a 3-day coordinated blackout (ceasing all publishing activity) to protest and raise awareness of Facebook’s ‘automated censorship’ – an algorithm-based practice of removing or suspending content that has been recognized as illicit with possible sanctions imposed on the publishing profile or page, such as limiting its visibility and/or posting options. The protest allegedly involved over 175 content producers and meme pages grouping together over “20 million likes/followers” with a ‘reach’ of “over 10% of Facebook’s daily user base”[29] at the time, although the exact numbers cannot be ascertained due to a significant number of fake and inactive accounts. Two years later, the organizers of the blackout contend at the same page that the protest has had virtually no effect on Facebook policies and left its image seemingly “unscathed” in view of high-profile scandals including Cambridge Analytica data scandal or Facebook’s controversial censorship of the iconic ‘napalm girl’ photo (Ibrahim 2017).

Similar to other social media, Facebook provides a technological infrastructure which is co-constructed by its users who regiment it through interaction along the lines of their social interests, e.g. by creating and joining (or ‘liking’) profiles, pages, groups and other collectivities dedicated to various interests, such as Internet memes. However, the organization of social life in such social niches is not merely subject to the human users who subscribe to and/or participate in them. The emerging body of literature on Facebook’s automated content filtering and curating – the algorithms that validate, evaluate and order the reach and presentation of content (e.g. posts and comments) to relevant users – shows that also these computational, artifactual and other non-human entities play a significant part in normative aspects of digital communication reaching beyond the role of a mere intermediary (e.g. Van Dijck 2013: 29; Tufekci 2015; Maly 2018).

Following this line of inquiry, this chapter is primarily concerned with the question *how the techno-social infrastructure of Facebook co-creates ludic normativity*. I will return to the temporal suspension of the *POLANDBALL* page discussed in Chapter 5 to discuss participants’ metapragmatic reception and reflections on possible causes leading to the suspension. This will be complemented by meta-discussions about more recent changes to the linguistic-semiotic patterns native to Countryball register and strategies enacted to avoid content removals and publishing suspensions and content deletions on both

[29] http://memealliance.org/actions/

Czechball and *POLANDBALL* pages respectively. The efforts to rebuild the meme page and subsequent adjustments to the communicative conduct point to an interconnected and mobile world in which the techno-social infrastructure of Facebook and its automated processes of content curation become "participants that are complexly intertwined in the production of action, social meaning, and subjectivity" (Bucholz and Hall 2016: 187).

What this means for negotiation for ludic normativity is that the normative criteria and expectations behind value attributions and judgments cannot be approached as emanating solely from one's command over particular communicative resources and proficiency in their histories of contextualization, and nor are they entirely derived from communal communicative spaces dedicated to memes. This chapter takes stock of the traditional notion of communicative competence in view of the need to account for the algorithmic agency implicated in socio-historical trajectories of communicative resources in a large-scale, mediated and multi-sited interactional work involving *both* human and non-human participants dispersed across memetic mediascape (i.e. other meme pages and digital niches organized around Internet memes),

To substantiate this conceptually, I draw on the recent posthumanist inroads made in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics to emphasize the intensifying interrelationships between humans, environments, communication and technology (Bulcholz and Hall 2016; Pennycook 2016, 2018; cf. Barad 2003; Hayles 2010). In this vein, posthumanism provides an incentive to broaden the understanding of communicative competence from the terms of internalized individual capacity (Wardaugh 1986) and/or communal repertoire (Bernstein 2000) to modes of thinking which decentralize human agency and reorient the term to "the multimodal and multisensory semiotic practices of the everyday [that] include dynamic relations between semiotic resources, activities, artefacts and space" (Pennycook 2016: 2; Appadurai 2015). This can be viewed as an addendum to the other recent attempts to de-center the traditional notion of communicative competence in order to explore the ways "in which it is never solely about agent's ability to function smoothly and seamlessly in the social contexts in which they live, nor it is solely about communication", and at the same time to re-center the term by "reassembling the complex dynamics of different scale that constitute it and exploring the relationships between them" (Kataoka et al. 2013: 349-350).

Following Pennycook (2016, 2018), the present work incorporates insights from new materialisms (Bennet 2010), distributed language (Cowley 2012), and actor-network theory (Latour 2005) under the rubric of posthumanism to get a better grasp on the mediating techno-social infrastructures being actively involved and implicated in the sociality of memes and meme-based discourses, how this involvement is perceived and reflected upon by participants' engagement with Countryball memes, and how it can refine the framework of communicative competence outlined above.

7.1 Memes and communicative competence in the posthumanist perspective

Ever since Hymes (1972) posited the term 'communicative competence' against the Chomskyan formal understanding of 'linguistic competence', the term *competence* has become in sociolinguistic and linguistic-anthropological literature virtually inseparable from linguistic resources and a community that uses them. Originally, the line of inquiry in linguistic anthropology focused on largely one-to-one or face-to-face participant frameworks in institutionally enclosed (Canale 1983) or small-scale, geographically anchored communities (Ochs 1988), and generally with little interest outside the fields of language acquisition and pedagogy (see Kataoka et al. 2013 for an overview). But the globalization characterized by complexifying connectivity and super-diversity has subsequently prompted sociolinguistics to expand the triad of communicative competence, community and communicative resources, namely

(i) from stable and sedentary linguistic resources of abstracted and idealized languages to mobile linguistic as well as semiotic resources of different values and form-function relationships ratified locally (Blommaert 2010; cf. Gumperz 1982),
(ii) from rather fixed and isolated (speech) communities to more dynamic, and socially constructed communities of practice and affinity spaces (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999; Gee 2005; cf. Rampton 2009), and
(iii) from a rigid notion of competence framed and delimited by standardized frameworks such as CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference) to more integrative notions of competence reflecting pragmatic and metapragmatic, but more importantly, situated aspects of communication (Blommaert and Backus 2013; see Goebel 2007 for an overview).

Importantly, following the ethnographically grounded research programs of Gumperz and Hymes, the locus of competence has shifted from abstract idealized language systems to the individual sociolinguistic actors and their 'indexical biographies' (Blommaert and Backus 2013), whereby communicative competence has been generally approached as

> both knowledge and practice where meaning is simultaneously negotiated and co-constructed by participants, the process thereof contributes to the reproduction of structures and text histories, while also being informed or mediated by local constraints" (Goebel 2007: 165; see also Ochs 1988: 21).

This interactional account of competence has been subsequently problematized with the increasing role of new media, as they generate more complex forms of competences in order to account for increasing mobility of people and the communicative resources they draw on, as well as their largely unpredictable, indeterminable and dynamically changing communicative potential (Appadurai 1996; Agha 2007a). Simultaneously it has become

gradually more difficult to define or delimit the notion of community in view of the dynamic relationships between groups of people and particular constellations of communicative resources and practices given the diversifying means and forms of mediation and mediatization (Androutsopoulos 2016) in addition to the continuing fragmentation of the public sphere (Van Dijk 2006: 69; Van Dijck 2013: 112). It can be argued that memes instantiate this new social reality in the sense that they constitute "serialized material-semiotic re-enactments" of the ebbs and flows of everyday life "that move and change within the dynamics of mediation and connectivity" (Pilipets and Winter 2017: 161) within and across disparate social niches embedded in particular techno-social infrastructures that facilitate and shape communicative conduct therein.

The scholarship on Internet memes has witnessed similar developments as those with regard to communicative competence. Early studies (most notably Knobel and Lankshear 2007) approaching memes in terms of participatory culture rose from the formal discourse on memetics originally conceived by Dawkins (1976; cf. Blackmore 1999). Subsequently a mounting body of literature has provided accounts on the role of memes in online community-making (e.g. Blommaert and Varis 2015; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015; Wiggins and Bowers 2015), problematizing the notion of literacy (e.g. Burgess and Green 2009; Procházka 2014), and engendering complex multi-semiotic practices and forms of identity work (Leppänen et al. 2014; Gal et al. 2016; Ask and Abidin 2018). More recently, several lines of research on memes show their potential to become part of larger knowledge constructions in which they exercise different augmenting functions, such as improving visual literacy (Romero and Bobkina 2017) and developing critical thinking (Wells 2018) in a classroom. Memes have been also documented as an intrinsic part of multimodal and multisemiotic assemblages co-creating a particular identity (du Preez and Lombard 2014) and facilitating social bonding (Varis and Blommaert 2015) on social media or enhancing commodification of spatial objects such as tourist sites (Valdez et al. 2017). Nonetheless, perhaps the fastest-growing line of research shows that memes operate as agents in contemporary globalizing cultural and political participation (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018; see also Chapter 2). Throughout these studies, one can also discern a shift from tentative descriptions, classifications and genealogies of memes as a series of genre-based entities to the ways in which they are situationally co-participating in meaning-making, identity work and managing interpersonal relations.

By engaging with Internet memes, participants make sense of the transcultural flows mediated and calibrated through the techno-social infrastructures potentially spanning multiple disparate social niches in which and through which they are circulated and resignified in socially and culturally meaningful ways. Each site differs in its socio-historical milieu and normative orientations, which ratify such processes. One meme may thus bring about different social effects (e.g. acceptance, dismissal, etc.) in each site while being relevant and constitutive of the effects generated in other sites to which memes or their audiences in question pertain. Seeing that memes inflect the sociality around them in terms of setting preferences and expectations with regard to communicative and behavioral conduct (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015), notion of competence needs to account for the socio-historical trajectories of the infrastructural, artifactual and environmental entities to which participants orient to and make sense of in interaction. This poses a

number of analytical and methodological challenges in the light of the disembodied character of online communication (people interact through technologically-mediated avatars or profiles which can be anonymous or fake), *ad hoc* sociality (forms of groupness or togetherness coalescing and pertaining only to a particular meme) and the non-linear nature of meaning-making and identity work taking place at multiple sites where the meme in question is deployed and contextualized with hardly predictable communicative effects.

To address these challenges, the notion of competence can be revisited by entertaining the posthumanist perception of a dispersed subject (i.e. a composite assemblage of human and computational, algorithmic, as well as other entities traditionally perceived as non-human) and of distributed language (Steffensen 2012). In this view, linguistic and semiotic practices are approached as *enacted* (rather than just individual or social), *embodied* (rather than just procedural) and *embedded* (rather than just representational) on one hand, and *distributed* across as well as *situated* within a wide array of spaces, artifacts and sensory domains rather than just in individual repertoires and communal reservoirs (Pennycook 2016: 7-8). The posthumanist perspective does not compel us to seek competence in the personal/individual or social/communal entities of the contemporary online-offline nexus. Instead, it invites us to consider how memes co-create dispersed yet interconnected ecologies with both human (Facebook users engaging with them) and non-human (algorithmic or imagined content moderating agents) entities intertwined in the production of meaning and organization communicative action in general. Gatekeeping practices in such ecologies represent an illustrative example. Since Facebook strives to maintain what it presents as a safe and inclusive environment through its content regulation, memes may become a target of censorship, especially if they carry disparaging or otherwise illicit referential meaning potentially violating the Community Standards. However, Facebook users organized around memes are usually attuned to their phatic, affective meaning that comes with the origin and/or socio-historical trajectories of their usage (Varis and Blommaert 2015; Katz and Shifman 2017), which may not be discernable to the content regulating mechanisms (whether enacted by human content moderators or automated algorithmic systems), and which may be in fact aligned with the inclusive sociality the Community Standards attempt to promote.

Before moving to specific examples, let us first review some of the general concepts employed to describe digital collectivities and their limitations *vis-à-vis* memetic communities sustained by the type of ludic sociality they foster in view of their inseparability from Facebook's algorithm-driven technologies that co-organize and regiment the communicative action therein.

7.2 Revisiting memetic communities

Having discussed the ludic normativity and its negotiation in several excerpts, it is now possible to return to the elastic communal bodies it gives birth to, and outline their socio-communicative contours and dynamics more clearly. A number of useful notions have already been employed to conceptualize the social life and communicative practices in

the collectivities forming against the backdrop of the online-offline nexus. In this regard, 'communities of practice' and 'affinity spaces' are highly prominent concepts in sociolinguistically inflected studies inspired by now classic works of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) and Gee (2005). While longer-lived communities of practice and more ephemeral affinity spaces conceptualize the meaningful arenas for social practice, their core ontological and epistemological architectonics inhibit adequate contextualization of social practices in the newly emerging collectivities devoted to Internet memes (for earlier criticism see, e.g., Gee 2005; Zhang and Watts 2008; Barden 2016). The limitations are intertwined to some extent: it is difficult for the concept of affinity space to account for

(i) the emic understanding of such collectivities which involves a communal sense of belonging but without strict categories or criteria of membership that is manifested in
(ii) the absence of developed hierarchies among members with clearly identifiable statuses such as an expert, initiate or newcomer, which in turn signals that
(iii) dissemination of knowledge and learning are not central to such collectivities.

On the other hand, the concept of community of practice is not geared to account

(i) for the extremely loose (if any) relations among often different sets of participants that come together around a particular meme, which lends itself to immense and hardly predictable variability in the participants and their engagements with memes and other participants therein;
(ii) for the diverse and dynamic changes in social practices involving memes expedited by the rapid advance of underlying techno-social infrastructures (e.g. social networking sites constantly amending their user interface as well as their codes of conduct that allow for publishing and validating memetic recontextualizations); and
(iii) for the disparate yet interconnected sites anchoring memetic collectivities and their socio-historical milieus being intertwined to various degrees by interspacing memetic trajectories. In this sense, memetic collectivities are more reminiscent of a 'nexus of practice' – "the intersection of multiple practices (or mediated actions) that are recognizable to a group of social actors", and thus shifting the focus away from groups and boundaries to "action as the organizing unit of analysis" (Scollon and Scollon 2007: 612).

In a similar vein, the present work has approached such collectivities as ludic 'light communities' – *focused but diverse occasioned coagulations of people converging around a shared focus* (Blommaert and Varis 2015) – in this case a particular meme posted in a particular Facebook page, which triggers such coagulations. These loose, elastic communities or 'gatherings' (Goffman 1963) do not necessarily entail participation in re-occurring settings, durable social ties or learning as in communities of practice or affinity spaces, nor are they firmly established social structures in the sense of Parsons and Durkheim. Here I argue that the main organizing principle rests on ludic conviviality; more

specifically, much of the social action therein is in fact grounded in 'play' with the following tentative characteristics inspired by Huizinga (1980: 7-14; cf. Blommaert 2017a):

(i) it is a mode of activity located outside what is commonly perceived as 'useful' or 'rational'; it is done 'just for fun' or – in a more contemporary vocabulary – 'for the lulz';
(ii) it is a voluntary activity performed as an act of freedom, and often functions as a protest or an alternative to established or mainstream ideas, practices or institutions;
(iii) despite its playful and potentially transgressive character, it is still a focused and nontrivial social activity in which every communicative input may find itself under scrutiny and become subject to policing;
(iv) it is thus a contested site of meaning-making and identity work enclosed in a particular setting (e.g. a post and its comment section) connected with both real and imagined spatiotemporal configurations. These settings and configurations are, nevertheless, invoked and nested within larger bodies (e.g. a Facebook page lodged in Facebook as a platform) with multiple intertwined sets of complementary as well as contesting normative orders (e.g. communicative expectations and preferences germane to a particular memetic genre as opposed to Facebook's Community Standards);
(v) its regulation is conducted both internally in terms of organic, grassroots (bottom-up) peer sanctioning in a given coagulation and externally through institutional (top-down) matching of the published content against illicit semiotic constellations by human content moderators as well as algorithm-driven content curating technologies.

This, of course, creates tensions between ludic and serious readings of memes, which may result in their peer acceptance and popularity but also in their takedown by Facebook's content curating mechanisms. The ludic recognition requires taking into consideration that both social actors and communicative resources they mobilize travel across different digital niches pushed and pulled by various normative criteria at different scale-levels. Previous chapters have shown that what might be considered a ludic, playful memetic satire in a particular meme page could be also considered transgressive, deplorable or offensive outside the ludic spatiotemporal setting. Likewise, it could be considered a ludic excess (i.e. 'going too far') in another meme page, even though both pages subscribe to and circulate the same memetic genres or formats. It is therefore necessary to pay close attention to the multiple and often layered histories of use (and abuse) within such systems as they result from local and situated processes of becoming, which (re)produce patterns of recognizability. These histories transpire in participants' responses to the increasing number of takedowns in observed meme pages as they inform about the content Facebook's content moderation policies and agents entering the normative negotiations and orders in memetic communities.

The technological architectures of given social media sites, in which the meme-publishing platforms are embedded, play a significant role in communication. The algorithms

organize and regiment the publication and reach as well as visibility of meme-related inputs. For example, on Facebook, one has to select the *All Comments* option in each comment section to see 'all comments, including comments in foreign languages and potential spam', some of which are not visible by default that favors comments and reactions from friends. This poses specific problems when groups, communities and other collectivities organized around Internet memes develop patterns of expectations and preferences in communicative conduct that incorporate (heteroglossic) semiotic resources associated with various different languages, dialects, accents, registers etc. Employing such resources is often imbued with elements of satire, banter, levity and other forms of comicality and humor, which are not recognizable for the underlying algorithms and thus may require further action on the part of a user to gain access to them. This has been addressed by a newly emerging strand in ethnography concerned with users' perceptions, understanding and relationship with algorithmic systems (Dourish 2016; Seaver 2017).

7.3 The ethnography of algorithmic systems

Rather than taking algorithms as abstract, formalized descriptions of computational procedures (Dourish 2016: 3), the ethnography of algorithmic systems is directed towards emic understanding of Facebook's curating algorithms affecting memetic discourses, that is, how participants navigate and make sense of the affordances or architectural design of a given platform with its 'semiotic regimes' (Djonov and Van Leeuwen 2018) that invite and delimit certain communicative and behavioral actions. This is to study how algorithms enter into the cultural dynamics and logic of memetic discourses in view of the social, political, technological and communicative ecologies of the collectivities organized around them. Seaver argues that "algorithms are not singular technical objects that enter into many different cultural interactions but are rather unstable objects, culturally enacted by the practices people use to engage with them" (2017: 5). It should be also kept in mind that the enacted nature of algorithms also expands the original question over how participants resist or improvise with such algorithmic capacities, while engendering novel and unexpected uses of communicative resources that are so characteristic for memetic discourses (Phillips and Milner 2017). Moreover, Facebook and other social media platforms have been deploying and improving large-scale, machine-learning recognition and detection technologies to facilitate automated filtering of illicit content (e.g. nudity, gore or graphic violence) and hate speech against 'protected characteristics' (namely ethnicity, nationality, gender, religious affiliation etc.). However, the technologies remain in the crosshairs for questionable reliability that does not always account for their intersectional complexity (Burnap and Williams 2016) or the fine-grained contextual intricacies in which they appear (Ross et al. 2016; Fortuna and Nunes 2018). Although Facebook's Community Standards governing the algorithmic behavior of such technologies are geared towards distinguishing between serious and humorous speech (as well as a work of art or artifacts), which may contain problematic linguistic and semiotic resources or their constellations, this chapter will show that, for example, memetic satire eludes such a clear-cut distinction

with significant social effects. Even with ever-increasing number of human content review moderators, there are limits to their body of knowledge and access to the transcontextual aspects of meaning-making and identity work (Kell 2015) upon which memes become a recognizable and meaningful form of communication within and across multiple different social niches at the same time.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, algorithms become part of the habitual processes by which online collectivities produce and construe semiotic signs and their indexical connotations and their patterns. Interestingly, the affordances of Web 2.0 facilitate the emergence of a multitude of influential and non-random indexicalities, which are not always recognized or ratified, and thereby visible. Inspired by Foucault (1980), Blommaert (2005, 2010) argues that the hierarchy or discrepancy between communicative sensibilities (the constellation of different intersecting orders of indexicality) is socio-historically shaped and extends beyond the immediate encounter; or as Rampton puts it, "to grasp their influence on what unfolds in any given interaction, researchers need know about communicative practice in different participants' social networks beyond the event itself" (2014: 11). Therefore, tracking the emic understanding of the algorithmic agency behind the distribution of memetic resources requires an eclectic, multi-sited ethnographic engagement with their trajectories within and across dispersed sites and from multiple sources.

To this end, I will return to the incident from early 2017 when the *POLANDBALL* page was suspended on the grounds that it had been violating the Community Standards and participants' discussions about its possible causes. The analysis then continues with short excerpts from 2018, which testify to the measures taken by both *POLANDBALL* and *Czechball* pages to reclaim ludic normativity while avoiding similar content takedowns, and how such measures were received by their respective audiences.

7.4 Analysis

Below is the official announcement published on the *Polandball 2.0* page first discussed in Section 5.3 (Figure 4) that confirms the suspicions about the original page *POLANDBALL* being removed permanently. In this section, I turn to participants' metapragmatic awareness in their inquiries about the sources of the removal in its comment section.

To reiterate, the satire in Countryball memes capitalizes on the principles of disparaging humor-incorporating elements of denigration, belittlement and maligning of various entities represented by Countryballs, which are not always accepted by Facebook. On that note, heteroglossic indexical tropes 'Anschluss' and 'kebab' point to sociocultural meaning reservoirs encapsulated in the stereotypes mobilized by the Countryball satire. While the former has already been discussed with regard to transposing negative or deplorable qualities associated with German imperialism and Nazism onto the Facebook character in the comics, the latter stands for a running gag meme "remove kebab" originating from memetic parodies of a Serbian propaganda music video from the early 1990s, which was uploaded to YouTube in 2006. Drawing on the nationalistic tone of the original video, the meme "remove kebab" was conceived as a euphemism for "ethnic cleansing

directed against Bosnian Turks specifically (kebab is a regional food)" (Urban Dictionary 2014: "remove kebab", n. pag.; cf. Know Your Meme 2010d: "Serbia Strong / Remove Kebab"), but later it has become a more general trope conveying anti-Islamic sentiments, especially in the fringe, white nationalist discourses (Zannettou et al. 2018; Coalson 2019). Apart from the above-mentioned, 'kebab' is also widely used as an ethnic slur referring to a Muslim, usually of Arab or Turkic origin.

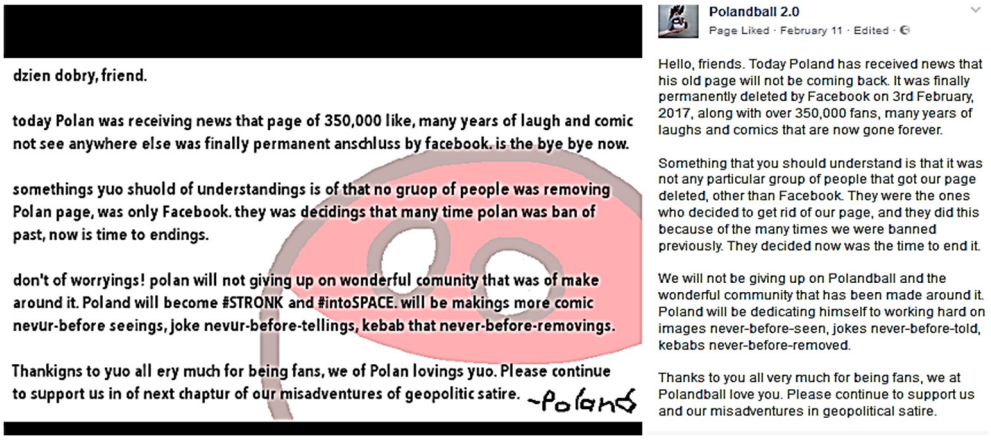


Figure 4. Facebook status announcing the permanent removal of the POLANDBALL page (the equivalent in Standard English can be found in the description, presumably by the same author). Posted on Polandball 2.0, February 11, 2017; excerpted on March 11, 2017.

In Chapter 4 and 5, I have explored participants' use of heteroglossic resources imbricated in the Countryball register, such as Polandball's iconic exhortation *kurwa* which now becomes a point of suspicion. Consider the following comments below the announcement in Figure 4 that inquire about the reason for the removal of the *POLANDBALL* page.

Participant 1: Yuo were over-using swearing.
Polandball 2.0: kurwa [fuck]
Participant 2: Where? Kurwa is like punctuation mark for poles. Real Polish swearing is much more complicated, [...]
Participant 3: It's a stereotype. Some poles actually use "kurwa" as if it was comma, but it's heavy swearing anyway
Participant 4: Kurwa am [is] always in our hearts <3 [heart shape; indicating love and sympathy]
Participant 5: #DefendKurwa

P1 points to the non-recognition of the phatic-poetic function (Jakobson 1960) behind the use of profanity in Countryball discourses. More specifically, the Polish expletive "kurwa" (a vulgar term for a prostitute, i.e. a 'whore'/'slut', or an interjection 'damn'/'shit'/'fuck' that may also stand as an intensifier or a filler) has become part and parcel of the ludic ethos of the indexical order of Countryball (especially with regard to the Polandball

character, see Chapter 4). To some extent, it reflects P2's account of its diminishing taboo status through excessive usage to express a variety of emotions, which has been documented in its increasing semantic productivity (Mormol 2016) and in general 'colloquialisation' of the contemporary Polish language (Garcarz 2004). And indeed, here it serves as a metapragmatic phatic marker signalizing communion, togetherness or general attunement with the Countryball community (P4); but, at the same time, it has acquired poetic properties in Countryball discourses (note that both P2 and P3 describe the use of 'kurwa' as a punctuation device which, by extension, indicates rhythmic and rhyming properties; see its use in Section 4.3). Furthermore, P5 utilizes the hashtag affordance[30] to demonstrate support and 'spread the message' by attaching it to the rallying cry "DefendKurwa".

However, as P3 notes, the expletive (and illicit) force of "kurwa" is still acknowledged outside Countryball discourses, which is precisely what distinguishes the ludic communicative space or 'playground' spawned by Countryball memes, and it is this ludic encirclement of Countryball discourses that fosters positive functions being mapped to "kurwa" in the course of its memetic iterations. As a result, "kurwa" has become an important part of identity work and meaning-making in Countryball discourse that is purposefully separated and distinguished from a higher-scale, institutional or formal discourses (which generally discourage profanity and/or impose sanctions on its use). On the other hand, Countryball meme pages are embedded within the larger techno-social infrastructure of Facebook, which is in part algorithmically maintained and in part enacted by human actors. The yardstick for measuring transgression, Facebook's Community Standards, apparently do not account for the local ludic order of indexicality native to Countryball, whereby the forms of semiosis involving "kurwa" and the like are believed to be consequently identified as hate speech, and thereby removed. The following comments come from other Countryball pages expressing solidarity and relating similar experiences of non-recognition.

Northern IrelandBall: I know your feels mate, I have recently been Zuccked for the stupidest shite like always, for 30 days ~Mario

[30] Marked by the pound sign #, hashtag enable users to find all the posts or contents that have been tagged with the same hashtag on a given platform.

Video Game Ball: Hello, PolandBall
We recognize and understand the problems you are experiencing lately.
The problem is that the politically correct is increasingly corrupting this social network thanks to a plague called SJW [social justice warriors]
We almost got knocked over by them there 2 years ago
We wanted to demonstrate that we support you, even more than once you commented on one of our posts, and that we have [been] inspired [by] you, because if it were not for you, Video Game Ball would never exist
#RebuildPolandball
-TheCosplayer and the entire VGB Staff

While *Northern IrelandBall* page is a more traditional Countryball offshoot dedicated to the geopolitical issues pertinent to Northern Ireland, *Video Game Ball* page has adopted the Countryball format to satirically reinterpret problems related to the game industry and wider gamer community. Both pages express support and sympathy with *POLANDBALL*'s predicament while narrating similar experiences. *Northern IrelandBall* (here represented by one of its admins nicknamed Mario) uses the term "Zuccked" (i.e. suspended and/or removed) invoking the name of Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, which has become a pejorative metonymic moniker standing for Facebook's censorship practices (Know Your Meme 2017b: "Zucked", n. pag.). In addition, a photo of Zuckerberg in a car is enclosed to echo a memorable quote 'get in loser, we're going shopping' from the 2004 comedy movie *Mean Girls* that later became a memetic template, and here serves to resemiotize Zuckerberg into the role of the movie's mean antagonist.

Video Game Ball (*VGB*) presents a much more composed message of support while drawing attention to imagined people or groups, namely proponents of 'political correctness'. While political correctness generally refers to discursive strategies or principles of avoiding utterances and actions that could offend or marginalize particular groups of people (largely corresponding with 'protected characteristics' against hate speech in Facebook's Community Standards), it has recently become a "spurious construct" (Fairclough 2003: 25) or a metapragmatic label for an ideological other often associated with imposing censorship and limiting freedom of speech, especially in the right-wing conservative circles. The term thus functions as a naming or categorizing device – a chronotopic 'frame' or a schema of interpretation in Goffman's vocabulary (1974) – allowing participants to organize experience in the sense of locating, perceiving, identifying and labeling events and entities involved in taking down the page. More specifically, recollecting previous experience with content curating mechanisms, VGB attributes agency behind their enactment to "politically correct" individuals or groups with specific labels

such as social justice warriors (SWJs),[31] which renders them also responsible for the removal of the *POLANDBALL* page. Inquiring about the identity of such people or groups is indeed a prevalent concern in the comment section. More examples follow below.

Participant 6: Wait wait guys, Facebook banned Poland because many people reported it, who are these fuckers?

Polandball 2.0: is opposite is what was sayings ^^ [indicating laughter].

Participant 6: thanks for the reply. But i think the previous bans must have come from people who report our polandball.

Participant 7: Don't post offensive memes then.

Participant 8: Offensive memes? These days everyone is offended by everything. You can post a blank and somewhere some cunt will get offended at that.

Participant 9: Old Polandball may be gone and resting in Cyberspace Grave but the Joy and Good times the we fans relish, shared, laughed and remember the topics that the Fans used to laugh there asses off and tipping off [infuriating] some Lefist [Leftists], Kebabs and other[s] [about] Geopolitical topics. Therefore Polandall will live on to the memory of every loving hearts of fans. New Polandball is a new beginning.

Similarly to P6, a considerable part of the participants of the comment sections in fact dispute Facebook's sole role in removing the page as it is presented in the announcement status and later reinforced by the administrator of the page in the response above. Given *POLANDBALL*'s previous bans, P6 seeks to outline an out-group of people who had been allegedly reporting the page under the assumption it was in a concerted effort to trigger an algorithmic reaction resulting in the bans. Although P7 suggests that this could be prevented by posting non-offensive memetic content, P8 answers that this is virtually impossible due to contemporary heightened sensitivity tied up with the previous remark about political correctness made by *Video Game Ball* (cf. Granath and Ullén 2017), whereby its proponents are perceived as having gone overboard with regard to identification and protection of alleged victims or those who are vulnerable along certain identity-based categories.

This can be read against Howard Beckers' *Outsiders* (1963) presenting a 'conflict-interactionist' perspective on the processes by which certain individuals come to be recognized or thought of as outsiders to a particular social group, and their reactions to that judgments. In this sense, the term *outsider* is to be approached as double-barreled: an individual who becomes labeled an outsider (i.e. deviant) may not regard those who visit such judgments upon him or her as legitimate; on the contrary, such an individual may likewise perceive the judges as outsiders. The reciprocal dynamic surfaces in P9's recount

[31] In certain memetic discourses, the term has recently become a pejorative umbrella designation for stereotypically sanctimonious left-wing commentators and activists who radically enforce socially progressive views and political correctness by virtue of hostile rhetoric appealing to emotions rather than rational arguments, thus seeking personal validation rather than pursuing genuine convictions (Know Your Meme 2016: "Social Justice Warrior").

of collective experience of the social life in *POLANDBALL*. The page has cultivated a ludic sociality that produced and fostered convivial effects from iterating the seemingly disparaging stereotypes in Countryball comics and discourses, which, according to the administrator of the page, has not been recognized and sanctioned by Facebook – its code of conduct renders them rule-breaking outsiders to be banned and their content removed.

However, the removal is thought to be enacted in part by other groups or individuals who are reciprocally perceived as outsiders because of their radical views. This includes 'Leftists' on one hand, particularly 'SJWs', who allegedly enact their 'politically correct' policies (in alignment with Community Standards) through exploiting Facebook's report function. And, on the other hand, "Kebabs" (antagonistic Turkish Countryball fans) for fomenting a rogue Countryball community appropriating the format to promote non-ludic nationalism, and likewise abusing the report function in the course of attacking other countryball pages that satirize it. Thus, "Leftists" and "Kebabs" represent emically constructed identity categories attached to the agency involved in the suspensions and temporary removal of the *POLANDBALL* and affiliated Countryball pages.

The posthumanist perspective on the conflict over the agency behind the takedown alerts us to the ways in which participants feel reflexively enmeshed in the environment (the communicative space provided or possibly denied by Facebook) and technology not only mediating but also seemingly supervising their communicative action. The resulting takedown appears to be attributed to both human (other Facebook users categorized along hostile ideological lines) and non-human, algorithmically operating entities moderating content (personified here as Zuckerberg). Although it is obvious that Facebook employs human content moderators, the results of their decisions about the appropriateness of the content are communicated on behalf of Facebook, thereby reducing or eliminating any human individuality. The following two excerpts from 2018 will focus on the emic understanding of the other part of such enactments (by what is perceived to be the non-human, algorithm-driven agency), and how such understanding contributes to the changes in the Countryball format as well as in participants' communicative practices and behavior.

Excerpt 7. "swastika=instant ban on facebook"

Countryball comics often reiterate or reminisce the 'glory days' and historical feats of particular countries through the prism of today. On that note, Figure 9 portrays a glimpse into the celebrated past of Russia, successfully resisting Napoleon's Russia campaign and the Axis invasion of Soviet Union while stressing their underestimation and inability to adapt to the frigid conditions of Russian winters (signified by frozen Frenchball and Naziball respectively). The message – that "no one can survive russian winter" – is challenged by nonchalant presence of Canadaball and Quebecball; furthermore, commenters also point to other historical events, such as Russia's military blunder with Finland during the Winter War (1939-1940) or successful Mongol invasion of Kievan Rus' in the 13th century.

Figure 9. Posted on POLANDBALL, November 6, 2018; excerpted January 9, 2019.

Although many semiotic stereotype-invoking emblems could be discussed in the light of their significance in the Countryball universe (Russiaball's ushanka-hat with a red star and vodka bottle as well as beaver's tail hat worn by Canadaball and Quebecball), attention needs to be paid to the letter "f" taking place instead of swastika on Naziball, which, of course, does not go unnoticed by participants in the comment section below.

Participant 10: Stop censoring swastika. It's hypocritic. Like Future generations have to forget stuff so history is violently repeated

Participant 11: swastika=instant ban on facebook :p [smiley with tongue sticking out; whimsically acknowledging P10's lack of knowledge]

P10 objects the self-imposed censorship by the author of the comics (*Quebecball* page and then shared by *POLANDBALL* page), echoing a well-known aphorism by the Spanish philosopher and poet George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (1905: 284). Moreover, self-censoring swastika is perceived as an act of hypocrisy in view of the continuous criticism leveled at Facebook's censoring practices. However, P11 retorts that posting a swastika or incorporating it into the comics immediately leads to a punitive action taken by Facebook. The purported immediacy deserves a closer inspection.

In June 2017, Facebook officially addressed the question 'Who should decide what is hate speech in an online global community' on its website and laid down the definition of hate speech, including Facebook's position towards it in the light of mounting criticism about (mis)handling objectionable content. In the answer, it is admitted that Facebook has been experimenting with artificial intelligence technology "to filter the most obviously toxic language in comments" and will continue "to invest in these promising advances" although it had not yet been possible to "rely on machine learning and AI to handle the complexity involved in assessing hate speech" due to immense contextual intricacies (Allan 2017, n. pag.). Later in September 2018, Facebook announced the deployment of a large-scale machine-learning recognition tool codenamed 'Rosetta' to facilitate automated "understanding text in images along with the context in which it appears [to] help proactively identify inappropriate or harmful content and keep [Facebook's] community safe" (Sivakumar et al. 2018, n. pag.). This has immediately prompted an inquiry to what extent such technology can recognize and understand memes and the contexts in which they are mobilized (e.g. Matsakis 2018), largely contending that 'meme-style' artifacts remain a challenge and require enlisting human moderators to determine their appropriateness.

It is beyond the scope of the present work to discuss or investigate the variability of access of human moderators to the trajectories of recontextualization of memes and their discourses in dispersed social niches, let alone the degree of fine-tuning of such technologies to account for their socio-ideological histories therein. Although it is virtually impossible to attribute the swastika takedown decision to user(s) report(s), the automated recognition tool or a human content reviewer (or their combination), the sheer speed of the action indicates little room for negotiation. It seems that if the Countryball genre is to continue posting on Facebook without severe limitations, the attenuating modifications in its semiotic register are necessary to fit Facebook's semiotic-ideological landscape curated by the assemblage of human and algorithm-driven non-human entities that enact and thus embody the Community Standards. This, of course, does not mean that all participants willingly submit to such communicative constraints or semiotic regimes. The final excerpt discussed here will zoom in on the *Czechball* page with regard to creative practices in accommodating to the content curating mechanisms.

Excerpt 8. "Insensitive Czechs"

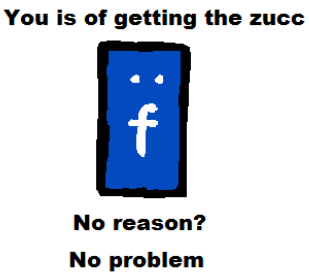
As already noted in previous chapters, *Czechball*, like many other locally-oriented offshoots of *POLANDBALL*, adopts the Countryball genre to accentuate nationally-grounded topics and proliferate political perspectives inflected by right-wing proclivities with regard to events of geopolitical significance. In this vein, Figure 10 resonates with Czech staunch dismissive approach towards the migrant relocation mechanism (i.e. sharing a proportionate amount of eligible asylum seekers in the wake of the European migrant crisis), whereby the migrants are once again depicted as a black 8ball. The mechanism was approved by the majority of the EU states, but refused by Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and partially Slovakia) in the course of a conflict over how to deal with the migrant crisis. The comic strip was first published in 2017 during the height

of the conflict which eventually crystallized into a formal complaint by the European commission against V4 countries except for Slovakia.

Figure 10. Posted on Czechball, October 4, 2018; excerpted January 9, 2019.

However, the original strip was quickly taken down for it contained an ethnic slur *nigger* typically referring to black people. Later the comic strip was re-uploaded in a modified state – the Czechball character does not finish the sentence and the last pane is blackened and overlaid with the caption "FaceBan – Have a nice fucking day"). Later still, in 2018, the strip reappeared as in Figure 10 with a blatant indication of self-censorship signified by the square brackets surrounding the 'algorithm-safe' term "AFRICAN AMERICAN". Again, this does not go unnoticed by the commenters. The parenthetical translation is mine.

Participant 12: Raději postni originál... (You better post the original...)
Czechball: -Nicholas



Participant 13: N
Participant 14: Igger :D [indicating laughter]
Participant 15: Nigglet
Participant 16: GINGER!!! But change the position of letters.

P12 attempts to tauntingly tease out the original comic strip containing the ethnic slur, while Nicholas (one of *Czechball's* administrators) retorts with a depiction of Facebook as a non-official countryball character[32] with a threatening caption informing about an impending suspension/ban (i.e. 'the zucc'), should that be the case. Nevertheless, P13 answers with a letter "N" alluding to its common euphemism ('n-word'), which is then completed by P14 in a jovial manner. Subsequently, P15 presents a diminutive form of the slur (usually referring to black babies or children) and P16 puts forth the anagram of the slur with interpretative guidelines. The playful co-construction of the slur is taken up as a creative ludic sport-like enterprise to avoid the censorship and alarming the imagined content-curating filters. At the same time, it testifies to a ludic excess frequently present in the second-generation of Countryball pages.

Finally, one is here reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome, which, like an Internet meme, "operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (1987: 21). Memes constitute recognizable patterns that are appropriated by multiple memetic collectivities with various degrees of ludic apprehension in view of their embeddedness in the techno-social infrastructures that mediate them under their governing policies and ideologies subsumed in their code of conducts. Such codes might be consequently materialized and embodied in specific actions (e.g. takedowns) enacted by an interplay between human and non-human agency, but hardly ever resulting in removing the meme in its variations dispersed over multiple sites, platforms and publics. Some of the implications for the traditional notion of communicative competence in sociolinguistic enterprise will be discussed below.

7.5 Concluding remarks

By focusing on situated metapragmatic discourses in dispersed Facebook meme pages, the chapter has demonstrated participants' reflections on some of the significant changes in linguistic and semiotic practices *vis-à-vis* collectively constructed emic understanding of content curating mechanisms and the policies behind them. Participants' metapragmatic accounts of such changes open up a largely unexplored avenue in research on communicative competence that takes into account the involvement of the mediating technologies in communicative action.

[32] Some Countryball characters are endowed with specific gimmicks. The Facebook (or 'Faceblock' in Countryball register) character is modeled after infamous Reichtangle (an antagonistic rectangular character based on former imperial Germany) endowed with menacing presence and hostile attitude towards other Countryballs, especially Polandball. In addition, Faceblock carries the same letter "f" as the censorship-proof Naziball to transpose the negative indexical qualities of repression and control.

The chapter has briefly discussed previous works seeking to update the Hymesian concept of communicative competence in order to address some of its undertheorized or criticized aspects stemming from its ethnographic roots. This included its static conception unable to fully capture creative aspects of social interaction and 'indeterminacy of context' (Gumperz 1982; Silverstein 1992), and its orientation to one-to-one or one-to-few participant frameworks inhibiting theorization of one-to-many multimodal frameworks employed by the media (Goffman 1974; Agha 2007a). Building on such works, this chapter has argued that the posthumanist framework can accommodate the concept to the techno-social infrastructure taking part in communication while approaching "semiosis as a process that emerges in the mutually constitutive action taking place between human and other entities with which they interact" (Bucholz and Hall 2016: 187).

In his defense of the 'theoretical' nature of outlining the notion of communicative competence, Hymes writes that practical work "must have an eye on the current state of theory, for it can be guided or misguided, encouraged or discouraged, by what it takes that state to be" (1972: 269). Returning to his original questions defining communicative competence – whether (and to what degree) something is *possible* (formally), *feasible* (implementation-wise), *appropriate* (context-wise) and actually *performed* (done) – the posthumanist theory carves out a perspective in which the mediating technologies and their social infrastructures cannot be simply taken for granted as 'static' objects, formally defining the corridors of *possibility* or *feasibility* of a certain communicative action, or background 'context' with clear-cut *appropriateness* criteria for that action, or passive 'tools' enlisted by a (rational) human 'user' to *perform* it (Gourlay 2015). On the contrary; far from the deterministic point of view, the techno-social infrastructures are enacted by interplay between human and non-human, algorithm-based agency through the course of which it assumes meaning and plays an important semiotic role while becoming part of communicative routine, which may interpellate participants through their everyday interactions. It has been shown that the techno-social infrastructure of Facebook is seen as asserting itself in the collaborative (albeit in this case unwanted) production and reception of Countryball memes distributed across a heterogeneous network of Countryball pages.

More concretely, Facebook has become a materialized antithesis to Bakhtin's notion of *superaddressee* – a dialogically positioned "'third party' standing above all the participants in the dialogue" who would actively and sympathetically respond to each utterance and understand it "just the right way" (1977: 30). Bakhtin noted that this invisible ideal listener has been historically personified in a number of ideological expressions, such as God, the absolute truth or science. Facebook is here emically construed, and in fact operates, as an *anti-superaddressee* in view of the impact of content curating mechanisms on the interaction involving memes and in the way it has been received by participants. It is taken as an Orwellian omnipresent yet invisible ideological entity overseeing and sorting the published content as well as the access to it by co-navigating user interface. At the same time, it has become a metalinguistic fact – a transcendent presence or a component constitutive of communicative conduct presupposing or anticipating the immanent misunderstanding or non-recognition of the playful, ludic nature of Countryball memes, their normative orders, and likely resulting in a takedown response.

As an anti-superaddressee, Facebook becomes complexly intertwined in the production of action, meaning and subjectivity not as a neutral object or a piece of mediating technology providing a (ludic) 'playground' for engaging with Countryball comics; but as an enacted entity invested with agency that puts the notion of competence into a new light. Participants' metapragmatic construal of Facebook as an anti-superaddressee shows reciprocal, interlocking relation in which participants make sense of Facebook's semiotic-ideological environment also through the way it supposedly makes sense of them in view of their communicative conduct (e.g. through its incurring suspensions). From this perspective, communicative competence marks an intersubjective interactional achievement in which the involved subjectivities pertain to dispersed assemblages of human and non-human entities and in which communication involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances spatiotemporally distributed.

Looking at the ludic ecologies of Countryball pages, the posthumanist perspective on competence additionally opens up a path to a neglected aspect of Huizinga's concept of 'play'. As pointed out by Eco (1973), Huizinga was only interested in play as a (aesthetic) performance and ignored the regulating systems that give substance to competence in play, that is, play as a particular configuration in a larger, rule-based game or games. In the posthumanist view, it is no longer only the participants who set and police the rules and who ratify others as valid or competent participants in view of such rules – it is also the playground itself. More precisely, it is the evolving imagery of Facebook that pertains to multiple discursive layers that render communicative behavior competent – competent in the sense of successfully navigating linguistic-semiotic practices in the local ludic ecologies of Countryball pages and large-scale, global ecology shaped by the enacting and enforcing Facebook's Community Standards via content curation. This includes the hetero- or transglossic (deploying resources from various languages, styles, genres, registers etc. against the backdrop of their verbal-ideological histories, e.g. incorporating the phatic/poetic use of "kurwa"), multi- or transmodal (traversing and evoking textual, pictorial and other modes of communication, e.g. substituting the letter "f" for a swastika), and transcultural or translocal layers of communicative practices (employing recognizable sociocultural resources both in territorial and deterritorial relations, e.g. capitalizing on recognizability of the Countryball genre to portray an illicit view on local milieus). Furthermore, since the digital playground of Countryball pages is constructed by transitory light communities (or coagulations) populated with transient participants – it is not entirely sealed off, as Huizinga argued, in spatiotemporal boundaries maintaining and protecting a 'sacred' ludic edifice against the outside 'real' world. Rather, it is an interdiscursively connected chronotopic network with porous boundaries through which different ecologies intertwine and collide in an engagement between human and non-human entities (e.g. when a page is suspended), giving way to emergent and interactant affordances that make up communicative competence (e.g. to avoid suspensions).

CHAPTER 8

‘Homo Ludens 2.0’: Closing thoughts

It is customary for academic works to conclude by giving the reader a final impression of the work while highlighting important insights of the research and outlining possible avenues to pursue in the future. Towards the end of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga heralds a bleak vision of play in his time. The shadow of rising totalitarian regimes and rapid technologization of social life surrounding its first publication in the late 1930s had left an impression on Huizinga that the element of play has waned from our civilization and culture (1980: 206). Looking at recent scholarly literature, a similar, ludic-less view now befalls Internet memes given their entrenchment in the digital infrastructures against the backdrop of rising political populism and extremism capitalizing on their insidious potential. These final pages will attempt to present a different view. Based on the insights gained from previous chapters, I will revisit the concept of play as a powerful, action-oriented heuristic for gaining a deeper understanding of memes in the contested fields of digital culture.

Contrary to his pessimistic conclusion, Huizinga’s play-concept has found fertile ground in the post-WWII academic scholarship, especially social sciences (e.g. Caillois 1957; Goffman 1974; cf. Bateman 1972), and continues to hold analytical purchase to this day (see McDonald 2019 for an overview). More recently, it has provided a fruitful ontological perspective on digital communication and media technologies enabling new forms of play and ludic (self-)expression (e.g. Baym 1995; Danet 2001; Deumert 2014). Apart from the burgeoning field of game studies, Huizinga’s play-concept has informed what Raessens (2012) calls a ‘ludic turn’ in media theory based around not just the creative utilization (and exploitation) of the affordances of communication technologies by their users but also the processes of ‘ludification’ – implementing elements of play in the domains previously not associated with it, such as work management, economics or politics (Rifkin 2000: 263; cf. Bauman 1995: 99)

Despite Huizinga’s puzzling ambiguities and contradictions, his concept of play remains a useful prism to approach ludification of digital culture (aptly noted as ‘Homo Ludens 2.0’ in Frissen et al. 2015), including the flows and contingencies of Internet memes and their social ramifications. As emblems of contemporary digital culture, Internet memes are illustrative examples of ludification in their capacity to ludify any walk of life, especially politics. Let us now briefly recount the ambiguities and contradictions that may have implicitly arisen in the previous chapters addressing the memetic ludification of (geo)political relations in Countryball memes and discourses.

We have seen that in memetic communities organized around Countryball memes, play seems to present itself as both *reality* and *appearance* divorced from ordinary life and expectations. Countryball memes seem to impose a play-frame on communicative conduct and practices, allowing participants to perform (ludic) identities and relational work which become discursively embedded in the social realities (i.e. play-worlds or play-grounds) they co-create. The Countryball universe provides communicative resources to engage with national and cultural stereotypes under a ludic-satirical frame that is supposed to negate otherwise disparaging and thorny remarks. However, the satire can get very serious when the ludic frame is threatened or broken, and the social reality sustaining the memetic community becomes fractured. So, while much of the interactional work pertaining to memes might seem to be carried out as part of disinterested satirical or parodic interlude, it gives life to larger, communal patterns to which its members might ascribe equal significance as to 'real' matters, according to the intensity of policing it receives.

This brings us to the second contradiction in Huizinga's play-concept, namely that play as a mode of interaction provides participants with *freedom* to engage with unusual or subversive forms of meaning-making and identity work that, nevertheless, exert *force* or *order* for such acts have to be recognizable as play for others. Indeed, play is a voluntary activity, yet it is also binding in the sense of being predicated on a certain socio-communicative (normative) organization preventing limitless and unbound frivolity. Participants are free to negotiate the precise shape of this organization by virtue of their participation in different social niches, but both memes and meme-related social niches display normative constraints shaped by their histories of contextualization. Since memes are iterative, their trajectories of iteration and variation are closely intertwined with the spaces in which they are deployed and interpreted, for such processes co-create a sense of normalcy in socio-communicative conduct therein. Therefore, while play allows for creation or invocation of separate spatiotemporal conditions (a play-chronotope, if you will) with alternative frames of interpretation, including perception and consumption of humor, it also requires an order that sustains such conditions and frames. The order originates not only in the form of particular arrangements of linguistic and semiotic resources or features that make memes recognizable but also in participants' discursive orientation to such resources. I have called this order 'ludic normativity'.

Consequently, play offers forms of interaction, which are both *determined* and *changing*. As soon as memes or memetic resources merge into a recognizable genre or format, they become associated with sets of normative expectations. Participants frequently express their ideas about what determines a 'good', 'funny' or 'proper' meme and what kinds of effects it should (or could) bring about. However, the normative expectations and ideals differ with each constellation of participants coalescing around a particular meme. Unlike game (i.e. formalized type of play), ludic play is subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation whereby its rules and boundaries are a result of an interactional achievement. Thus, while ludic normativity may be established on the basis of wider, translocal and ideological values attached to memes over their trajectories of iteration (e.g. as a form of tradition in particular meme-based social niches), it is also a result of participants' local, situated acting on their normative expectations elsewhere,

which may or may not be in accordance with the historical 'traditions'. Furthermore, the precise contours of ludic normativity are also shaped by technological and ideological affordances of the given platform enabling its enactment, and since these affordances usually change over time, ludic normativity changes as well. This can be seen in different social niches dedicated to the Countryball phenomenon with sometimes dramatic differences in what kinds of actions 'pass the muster', and which actions are reflexively perceived as transgressive, out-of-place or trivial by both regular participants and content moderating agents.

Finally, play is both *individual* and *collective*. Individual participants congregate around memes, but their interactions and communicative organization feed into a sense of groupness, which, in the case of Countryball memes, co-creates a ludic playground or play-world before both real and imagined audiences that may participate in it. Individual communicative inputs are then measured against various normative expectations and ratified by the respective audiences while the processes of ratification are often ludic in themselves. In Chapter 6, the concept of transindividual individuation was used to avoid dichotomy between the individual and the collective in view of their emergent nature inseparable from the techno-social infrastructures and their affordances. Furthermore, play is *technological* since the ratifications of socio-communicative conduct fall victim also to expectations and ideologies policed and enforced by the algorithm-driven platforms enabling the ludic enactments and sociality in the first place. Since the platforms can be hardly considered neutral digital intermediaries of communicative action, Chapter 7 explored participants' perceptions of Facebook as an active participant in play and negotiation of ludic normativity.

Although Countryball memes and discourses are unusual in a number of ways (see Chapters 1 and 2), the ludic lenses applied here might be useful in gaining deeper insights into recent political memes and meme-related discourses that appear to be increasingly surrounded by an aura of malevolence, antagonism and disassociative laughter (Hine et al. 2016). Indeed, engaging with Internet memes in the sense of play as something inconsequential to institutional and everyday reality is rarely considered in the light of present concerns about authenticity, visibility, pervasiveness and general significance of digital content and practices in the contemporary online-offline nexus (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Phillips and Milner 2017; Shifman 2018; Mina 2019; Venturini 2019). A growing number of studies have demonstrated that although memes evolved from strictly apolitical subcultures, nowadays they are exploited as effective tools in political campaigns and ideological crusades. Despite their overwhelming online presence, memes may engender or contribute to serious 'offline' effects, such as affecting voting behavior (Ross and Rivers 2017), normalizing radical/extremist beliefs (Maly 2019) and even fomenting acts of terrorism (Munn 2019). Being easily carried from the fringes of the Internet to mainstream social media (Greene 2019), memes have been described as 'IEDs [improvised explosive devices] of information warfare' (Siegel 2017) complicit in subverting or altering dominant narratives and discourses, baiting journalists into spreading and reproducing harmful, polluted and false information, as well as manipulating the attention economies and incentivizing pathological behaviors (Phillips 2018; Lamont 2019). Terms like 'weaponization of social media' and 'memetic warfare' are increasingly more used in both popular

and academic texts in reference to the new digital frontlines of the so-called culture wars and metapolitics (Nagle 2017), which uncover the spuriousness of the dichotomies between the 'online' and the 'offline' as well as between the 'real' and the 'virtual' (Miller 2016). Most notably, the online activism of the far-right in the US and Europe is being well documented in terms of offline consequences (e.g. Bogerts and Fielitz 2018; Lamerichs 2018; see papers in Fielitz and Thurston 2018). Memes infused with misogynist, racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, or otherwise deviant imagery and sentiments are often coated in irony and humor by those who propel them under the disguise of non-serious jokes and innocuous spoofs allegedly designed just for laughs, fun or 'lulz'. Upon confrontation, these are often accompanied by distancing phrases like 'only joking', 'it's a meme' or 'that's not what I meant' (Varis 2019), relegating the problematic content to the realms of the non-real, emptied simulacra – mere satirical or parodic representations of the 'real', not to be taken seriously, although their serious effects are hard to dismiss (Davey and Ebner 2017; Phillips and Milner 2018). So how can Huizinga help us understand the dynamics of (non-)seriousness in the bigoted fringes of the web using memes to 'infect' (to use Dawkins' 1976 original term) the digital mainstream and popular culture?

First, the ambiguities and contradictions in Huizinga's play-concept need not be viewed as dichotomous. They are better understood as dialectically unfolding sides of the same coin. Through play, and in play, participants navigate and exploit the polycentric affordances of digital landscapes – their interactional regimes, the stochastic flux of communal life, the unpredictability of social (and sociolinguistic) systems and indeterminacy of meaning (Blommaert 2018). The distinctiveness of the above-mentioned categories dissolves once we accept *ambivalency*, not earnestness, as a central trait of contemporary media, politics and social life in digital culture (Phillips and Milner 2017). Ambivalency in this sense coincides with the double character of play:

> What distinguishes playing from sheer serious modes of being on the one hand and sheer fantasy on the other, is that the player simultaneously is both in the ordinary world and in the play-world and that we all are aware of simultaneously being in both worlds. (Frissen et al. 2015: 18)

As a consequence, "we can enthusiastically immerse ourselves in the play-world, while at the same time keep an ironic distance towards our playful behavior" (Frissen et al. 2015: 19). This does not mean stepping into the 'magic circle' of the play-world, as Huizinga maintained, but rather 'doubling' our existence, as Fink (1968) argues. In other words, once we engage with/in play, our actions and behavior become accountable towards at least two different chronotopes in which one constitutes a play-chronotope. Seeing chronotopes as spatiotemporal configurations generating affordances and imposing constraints on socio-communicative action, the play-chronotope operates as a parallel anchoring of our communicative practices, dramatically extending the range of possibilities and acceptability in meaning-making, identity work and managing interpersonal relations. However, since the existence of a play-chronotope is conditioned by interactional recognition and ratification, it is invoked, negotiated or simply 'made' by the very actions it

sustains and situations to which such actions pertain. Situations that, in the sense of Garfinkel, "provide for the appearances of individuals" (Rawls 2002: 46). Therefore, it seems useful to distinguish "between the real man who 'plays' and the man created by the role within the play […]. Man exists in two spheres simultaneously, not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness, but because this double personality is essential to play" (Fink 1968: 23). This is, of course, no easy task since ludic play in digital settings is not always metacommunicative, that is, accompanied by clear signals informing participants and their audiences that 'this is a play', meaning that "these actions in which we now engage do not denote what these actions *for which they stand* would denote" (Bateson 1972: 69, original emphasis). For example, in communities organized around Countryball meme-comics, the element of play is clearly signaled in the cartoonish makeup and the socio-communicative practices and situations it accommodates, but the effects it generates in different meme-related niches may not always be perceived as playful. Examining the uptake of chronotopic work performed by participants, that is, invoking and (especially) challenging chronotopic representations of events, people, institutions, countries and other entities provide valuable cues not only to how participants frame and re-frame social, cultural or political realities mediated by Internet memes but also what strategies and resources they use to establish or contest ludic elements in interpretative and relational work towards both real and imagined audiences.

Second, accepting the double nature of play as a starting point, we can concentrate on participants' own metapragmatic awareness of the multi-layered chronotopic organization of their participation. Participants regularly co-create what Bakhtin (1994) calls a double-voiced discourse in which explicit categorizations or identifications of chronotopic entities involve or imply categorization of such entities on another level or scale that may be discernable to particular audiences – audiences that share discursive orientation (e.g. ludic attunement), specific knowledge (e.g. intertextual references and allusions in memes) or world-views (e.g. including those of bigoted, prejudiced or extremist nature). It should be no surprise that the digital landscape is inherently polycentric and populated by heterogeneous audiences. Even its most radically-minded peripheries consist of different voices with different tastes, orientations and senses of 'normalcy' locked in constant negotiation. This has been well documented in Phillips' 'auto-ethnographic' experience with the early trolling subcultures complicit in the above-mentioned concerns about using (popular) memes as vehicles for desensitizing and normalizing problematic ideas and sentiments:

> A lot of 'internet culture' *was* harmless and fun and funny. But it came with a very high price of entry. To enjoy the fun and funny memes, you had to be willing—you had to be able—to deal with all the ugly ones. When faced with this bargain, many people simply laughed at both. It was hard to take Nazi memes all that seriously when they were sandwiched between sassy cats and golf course enforcement bears. […] Others selectively ignored the most upsetting images, or at least found ways to cordon them off as being 'just' a joke, or more frequently, 'just' trolling, on 'just' the internet. […] The ability to disconnect from consequence, from specificity, from anything but one's own desire to remain amused forever, kept the ugliness that was always tucked into the folds of internet culture nebulous.

> At best, it kept the nastiest bits 'just'-ed away—at least for the people who got to pick and choose what got to be fun. (Phillips 2019: 2, original emphasis)

Focusing on the tensions, frictions and ruptures in the double character of play, in the (ironic) distancing as it speaks of navigating multiple social realities and their chronotopic organization, can help us understand, on a deeply qualitative basis, how the trajectories of meaning-making relevant to particular memetic content alternate between puerile or whimsical relational work and serious uptake with possible interpellation of its audiences. While very little can be assumed about participants and their intentions, their actions and engagements remain open to scrutiny. As shown in Chapters 4 and 5, following participants' metapragmatically reflexive actions (along with their indexical vectors pointing to translocal and socio-historical aspects of their communicative practices) illuminates the ways in which memes are contextualized in line with different normative expectations. The metapragmatic actions testify to participants' negotiations of both divergent as well as convergent expectations, and it is precisely in this negotiation – at the intersection or collision of different chronotopes – that we are able to discern the role of play in normative-evaluative judgments and categorization of others – in other words – who is who in 'us' vs. 'them', who is a 'normie', who is a 'shill', who is a 'patriot' etc.

Third, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, ludic modes of engagement and interaction stimulated by memes are inseparable from the techno-social infrastructures in which they take place. Be it social networking sites, blogs or fora, the infrastructures operate within bounds of their technological and ideological architectures inscribed in their user interface, default settings, content-sorting algorithms, codes of conduct or content moderation. These infrastructural parameters also represent normative variables integrated or reflected in play as they enter the ludic enactments, negotiations and exploitations by becoming part of communicative competence distributed over niches grounded in such infrastructures. The case of adjusting Countryball memes and participants modulating their communicative behavior to maintain ludic normativity while avoiding punitive reactions from Facebook was relatively clear. But less clear are other adaptations to controversial memetic content, including its framing and counter-framing so it is more likely to fit the normative constraints of the environments in which they are to be published. By the same token, relatively little is known about memes involved in *gaming* the infrastructural properties – exploiting the automated or algorithm-driven procedures and functionalities in order to increase visibility of certain content or to decrease the reach and credibility of other content. In the case of Countryballs, participants frequently mentioned concerted abusing the report function on Facebook to eliminate or suspend targeted Countryball pages. Other methods involving memes observed elsewhere, for example in algorithmic manipulation, include generating artificial popularity by means of clickbaits and astroturfing (Venturini 2019), using fake accounts and bot networks (Maly 2018) and reverse-engineering the automated filtering in order to curate and subsequently promote the content more effectively (Tufekci 2017). The content at the center of this 'augmented' engagement then becomes easily inflated and amplified once recognized as 'trending' by the algorithms measuring online traffic or 'viral' by the reporting media delivering it to wider (or sometimes very narrowly targeted) audiences. The seriousness with which

these actions are executed does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a ludic frame surrounding them. While it is virtually impossible to determine whether they are done for fun ('just to see what happens'), profit or out of a sincere desire to change the political realities, the ludic framework for analyzing their uptake might provide us with more emic insights into the role of memes in not only the facilitation but also resistance to 'mainstreaming the fringe' (Barkun 2015; Zannettou et al. 2018).

Of course, not all politically oriented memes are circulated only to polarize the publics, divert attention, destabilize institutions, whitewash racism or foster dehumanizing sense of humor. Apart from a demand for wholesome memes and cultivation of convivial memetic discourses (Hunt 2016), there are also efforts to thwart co-opting memes into institutional politics and their weaponization (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz 2018). Facebook pages dedicated to Countryball memes stand in a line of similar examples. But despite their household name in meme-savvy circles and long-cultivated ludic sociality, their uptake is illustrative of the treacherous, contested territory of Internet memes pushed and pulled to various directions motived by convoluted and competing interests. Their meanings and significance constitute a moving target, both affirmed and challenged by the communities that form around them, by those who report on them, and even by those who come across them unwittingly. And yet, despite the unpredictability and ambivalency of the everyday Internet, the ludic historicity of memes cannot be abstracted away from the discourses in which they are recognized and mobilized.

On the contrary, it can serve as a useful conceptual tool for shedding light on the layers of normative complexity behind the seemingly banal design of most memes and the sociocultural coherence memes co-create among disparate and disembodied collectivities dispersed in digital environments. In the action-oriented perspective, memes and memetic encounters can be approached as 'interdiscursive hubs' (Goebel 2019) in which elements of different narratives and frames are iterated or recombined into (ludic) representations of people, events, institutions and other entities. Chronotopic understanding of such interdiscursive hubs is subsequently 'never pure' but always "accomplished in terms of evaluation of what is perceived" (Holquist 2002: 152) by participants on the basis of their discursive orientations or stances, "which are themselves informed by a range of external factors and condition what is deemed an acceptable communicative behavior in a given situation" (Lyons and Tagg 2019: 659). The ethnographic focus on socioculturally significant indexicals mobilized in participants' chronotopic work (e.g. metapragmatic references in stance-taking) allows for identifying the practices and strategies used to establish, maintain or challenge a ludic background of their (inter)actions. Zooming in on the tension between ludic and serious uptake in memetic encounters through the chronotopic prism offers cues for a better understanding of the dynamic social, cultural and political processes in the digital environments. Cues that elude more quantitatively oriented perspectives such as social network analysis or sentiment analysis. Cues that lead us to the complex gradient behind the usual, mediatized angles in which political events are framed and in which socio-cultural phenomena are contextualized and in which ideologies are solidified or challenged.

To conclude, the play-concept offers a wider optics to review scholarship investigating the memetic flows and convulsions in digital ecosystems. The sheer number of academic

studies has been rising almost exponentially, indicating that memes are being taken seriously by scholars of diverse backgrounds. This gives us an opportunity for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, as well as critical reflection of not only *what* we find in the field of Internet memes but also *how* we approach the field, not to mention the incentive for revising our analytical vocabulary. Employing the ludic framework can help identifying the overlooked, neglected or yet undetected patterns and connections in the contingent, indeterminable and ambiguous world of Internet memes. It invites us to dive into the deeper, more subtle ways in which participants navigate and exploit the affordances of the contemporary online-offline nexus.

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Summary

This thesis explores the capacity of Internet memes to inflect the social realities in the communities organized around them on social media, particularly Facebook. As multimodal cultural artefacts, memes are not mere communicative resources spreading virally throughout the Internet in countless iterations – they also provide social glue for flexible and ephemeral forms collectivities forming around them. In such new forms of belonging and togetherness, we are witnessing unprecedented spread, solidification and 'normalization' of hateful sentiments and ideologies in the digital mainstream. The ways in which people relate to memes in communities coalescing around them invites us to study new modes of social interaction and organization regimented by not only human users but also algorithmic, computational entities evaluating and sorting digital content. In this work, I argue that much of the socio-cultural and semiotic dynamics of such intertwined processes can be understood in terms of ludic play.

Drawing on Huizinga's seminal account of ludic play as an activity separated from the gravity of everyday life and its norms or rationality, play is here understood as a useful heuristic for identifying ludic frames pertaining to social encounters prompted by particular memes – frames that create and impose different sets normative patterns and orders in socio-communicative conduct with the understanding that the effects of meaning-making and identity performance might not be the same as outside the play-frame. To discover the contours and dynamics of the ludic frames surrounding memetic discourses and memetic communities, the present work employs the principles of digital ethnography along the lines of contemporary sociolinguistics inspired by symbolic interactionism and Bakhtin's philosophy of language. The point of departure lies in participants' interactional work in the comment sections consisting of metapragmatically reflexive activities. That is, situations involving conflicts or negotiation about what is acceptable, appropriate or 'correct' in socio-communicative conduct in memetic discourses and communities sustained by such discourses. In particular, this work focuses on identifying ludic patterns or 'ludic normativity', which is negotiated in a network of Facebook pages dedicated to Countryball meme-comics.

Countryballs are ball-shaped characters in colours denoting both contemporary and historical nation-states set into a comics format that reinvents geopolitical events and international relations through the prism of national, socio-cultural and linguistic stereotypes. Unlike the vast majority of memetic genres, the Countryball phenomenon has kept its recognizable communicative patterns and scripts based on the reiteration of these stereotypes since its conception in 2009, and continues to grow in popularity on virtually

all major social media. It offers a reservoir of linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources for alternative portrayals of geopolitical realities in an easy-to-draw, child-like format. The craft lies in creating recognisable and often heteroglossic depictions of geopolitical realities while appropriating and subverting aspects political and public discourses, as well as other memetic formats and genres. Countryball niches thus provide an illustrative testament to not only how various matters of public attention are packed, framed and transmitted in the digital culture, but also how such matters are in fact interpreted by those who engage with them, and what forms of ludic normativity underlie the interactional and interpretative work on the part of participants in the contemporary online-offline nexus.

Starting with a historical overview, the thesis begins with tracing the ludic roots throughout the literature on Internet memes against the socio-historical development and spread of Countryball memes. It addresses how (Countryball) memes and meme-making evolved from an apolitical and fun-driven enterprise enclosed to a few social niches on image-boards such as 4chan and Reddit to becoming a staple of digital culture at large with significant bearings on political sphere. This section identifies the ludic ingredients of play, that is, how participants co-create and negotiate ludic *separateness* of their conduct (i.e. a playground), how this separation creates normative *orders* and how these orders give birth to memetic *communities* coalescing around memes precisely in the ways participants construct and construe memetic contexts. Play is thus located at the center of the present analytical focus as a form of social *action* performed rather than presumed social *actors* or *systems* engaging with memes.

The thesis then proceeds with four case studies concentrating on how participants negotiate ludic normativity in two Facebook pages – the first and largest page *POLAND-BALL* serving as a global hub of Countryball fans and its more locally-grounded offshoot *Czechball* capitalizing the popular genre to accentuate Czech-related (geo)political realities.

The first study addresses the question how participants articulate ludic normativity. It outlines the concept of Facebook meme pages as translocal ludic 'light communities' in order to capture the local significance of memetic uptake in terms of participants' metapragmatic reflections on ludic normativity against its enactments in different Countryball niches. Translocality is here used as a useful tool in uncovering the ludic ways in which specific memes provide socio-cultural coherence in such niches or locales through navigating various degrees of sharedness in expectations and preferences about the communicative conduct therein. It employs the analytical toolkit provided sociolinguistics of globalization to describe how participants negotiate and contest the ludic relationships between form, function and meaning, as they utilize different communicative competences and display various normative alignments. By focusing on the participants' (mis)recognition and ratification of communicative practices within and across memetic communities, the study brings insights into how specific communicative resources acquire different values within and across different localities, and how such differences contribute to the social effects of inclusion and exclusion.

The second case study deals with the question how participants police ludic normativity. It concentrates on a two-week period in early February 2017 when Facebook had

deleted the *POLANDBALL* page, and the translocal network of Countryball pages was galvanized to participate in rebuilding the original page as *Polandball 2.0* – until the original page was reinstated by Facebook. Attention is paid to 'memetic vigilantism': metapragmatic interventions in an ongoing discourse enacted upon potential transgressions or perceived violations of the normative blueprints along which the page ought to have been rebuilt. In addition, Bakhtin's notion of chronotope (literally 'time-space') is introduced into the analytical apparatus as a spatiotemporal matrix on the basis of which identity work and meaning-making processes are organized, regimented and policed. It is argued that different chronotopic conditions co-create the complex normatively polycentric environment of Facebook meme pages while memetic 'vigilantes' point to the economy of indexicals governing invocations of such conditions. The chronotopic approach to memetic vigilantism lays bare the socio-historical trajectories of memetic resources along which participants negotiate ludic normativity in the *Polandball 2.0* project. Different participants concurrently recognize different indexical orders at different scale levels, while some may be not recognized at all due to insufficient access to relevant discourses and their histories. Finally, the second study demonstrates that imagining Facebook meme pages as a communicatively organized and dialectically ratified set of social relations with respect to particular chronotopic configurations offers a more nuanced account of social cohesion, meaning making and identity work in the largely fragmented digital mediascape.

The third study is concerned with the question how participants intentionally break ludic normativity. It combines the chronotopic framework with Simondon's philosophy of technology embedded in his theory of individuation to account for the role of technological affordances play in participants' contextualization of memetic encounters. In doing so, the analytical focus zooms in on participants' individual trajectories of becoming, that is, becoming by differentiating themselves against dominant or expectant normative orders in Countryball pages. Here, the negotiations of ludic normativity are viewed v*is-à-vis* serious, non-ludic uptake of their rendering of political discussions in the wake of the European migrant crisis, particularly regarding inter-EU conflict about migrant relocation quota. It shows the multi-layered and multi-scalar complexity behind what is frequently simplistically portrayed as pro- or anti-migrant sentiments pervading the public imagery over how to deal with the crisis. This includes participants' personal perceptions and interpersonal relevance with respect to the migrant crisis on different scales going from the local or regional scope of nation-states to the translocal or transnational scales of European Union and Visegrad countries. Simondon's theory of individuation provides an incentive to look at how technology, individuals, groups, communities and other entities, both human and non-human, are continually arising not *in* but *as* dynamic and interactionally achieved relations. Approached chronotopically, it offers a rich perspective on how contemporary transcultural flows foster the emergence of countless elaborate appearances and modes of self-presentation on a daily basis through a dialogic relationship with the techno-social infrastructures of social media, and how they dislodge or fall into normative patterns.

The final fourth study investigates how participants (re-)construct ludic normativity. It focuses on participants' responses to adapting memetic formats in the light of the recently increased intensity in Facebook's taking down of the memetic content on the grounds of violating its code of conduct. Recent inroads of posthumanism in sociolinguistic and applied linguistics are employed to demonstrate that the techno-social infrastructures of social media are better understood as being enacted by the interplay between human and non-human, algorithm-based agency. In particular, the techno-social infrastructure of Facebook is seen as asserting itself in the collaborative (albeit in this case unwanted) production meaning and reception of Countryball memes distributed across a heterogeneous network of Countryball pages whose ludic kernels might not be always recognized or acknowledged. This brings important implications for traditional notions such as 'communicative competence' or 'community', which are discussed here as well.

The final chapter revisits the concept of ludic play in the light of the insights gained from previous chapters. This is done alongside more recent literature on Internet memes concerned with 'weaponization' of memes to propel discourses centered around hateful sentiments and ideologies under the guise of harmless entertainment often framed by its proponents as 'just a joke', whereby much of the participation is done 'just for fun'. The ludic play-concept is proposed as a fruitful perspective in approaching not only meme work itself, but also the findings in scholarship interested in the role of Internet memes in the contemporary digital nexus at large.

Tilburg Dissertations in Culture Studies

This list includes the doctoral dissertations that through their authors and/or supervisors are related to the Department of Culture Studies at the Tilburg University School of Humanities and Digital Sciences. The dissertations cover the broad field of contemporary sociocultural change in domains such as language and communication, performing arts, social and spiritual ritualization, media and politics.

1 Sander Bax. *De taak van de schrijver. Het poëticale debat in de Nederlandse literatuur (1968-1985)*. Supervisors: Jaap Goedegebuure and Odile Heynders, 23 May 2007.
2 Tamara van Schilt-Mol. *Differential item functioning en itembias in de cito-eindtoets basisonderwijs. Oorzaken van onbedoelde moeilijkheden in toetsopgaven voor leerlingen van Turkse en Marokkaanse afkomst*. Supervisors: Ton Vallen and Henny Uiterwijk, 20 June 2007.
3 Mustafa Güleç. *Differences in similarities: A comparative study on Turkish language achievement and proficiency in a Dutch migration context*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 25 June 2007.
4 Massimiliano Spotti. *Developing identities: Identity construction in multicultural primary classrooms in The Netherlands and Flanders*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Guus Extra, 23 November 2007.
5 A. Seza Doğruöz. *Synchronic variation and diachronic change in Dutch Turkish: A corpus based analysis*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 12 December 2007.
6 Daan van Bel. *Het verklaren van leesgedrag met een impliciete attitudemeting*. Supervisors: Hugo Verdaasdonk, Helma van Lierop and Mia Stokmans, 28 March 2008.
7 Sharda Roelsma-Somer. *De kwaliteit van Hindoescholen*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Sjaak Braster, 17 September 2008.
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9 Dong Jie. *The making of migrant identities in Beijing: Scale, discourse, and diversity*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 4 November 2009.
10 Elma Nap-Kolhoff. *Second language acquisition in early childhood: A longitudinal multiple case study of Turkish-Dutch children*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 12 May 2010.
11 Maria Mos. *Complex lexical items*. Supervisors: Antal van den Bosch, Ad Backus and Anne Vermeer, 12 May 2010.
12 António da Graça. *Etnische zelforganisaties in het integratieproces. Een case study in de Kaapverdische gemeenschap in Rotterdam*. Supervisor: Ruben Gowricharn, 8 October 2010.
13 Kasper Juffermans. *Local languaging: Literacy products and practices in Gambian society*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 13 October 2010.

14 Marja van Knippenberg. *Nederlands in het Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs. Een casestudy in de opleiding Helpende Zorg*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen and Jeanne Kurvers, 14 December 2010.
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16 Nadia Eversteijn-Kluijtmans. *"All at once" – Language choice and codeswitching by Turkish-Dutch teenagers*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 14 January 2011.
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